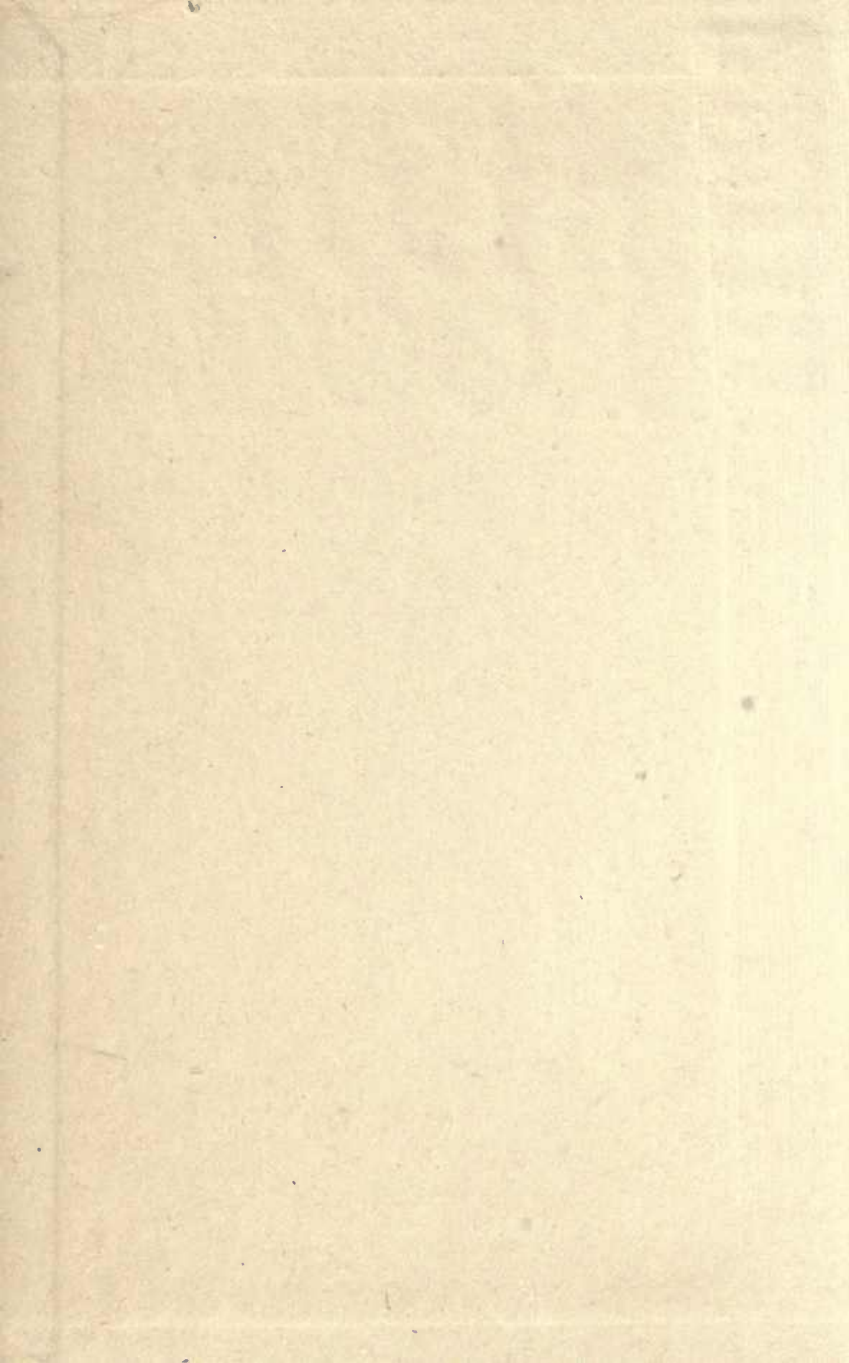


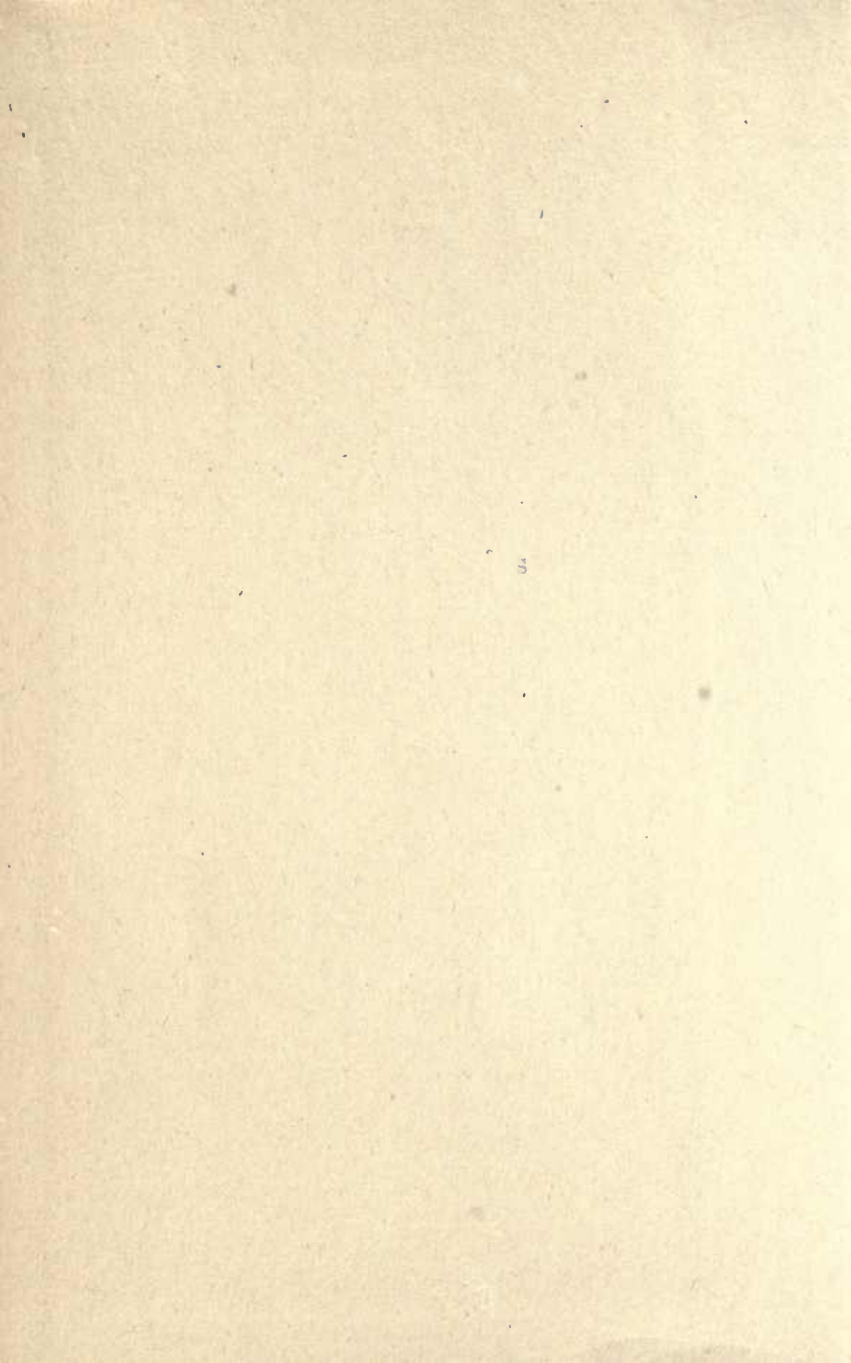
THE BLUE ROOM

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COSMO HAMILTON



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THE BLUE ROOM

By Cosmo Hamilton

THE BLUE ROOM

SCANDAL

WHO CARES ?

HIS FRIEND AND HIS WIFE

THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

THE DOOR THAT HAS NO KEY

THE MIRACLE OF LOVE



One more blundering pause,— and then the cry, and
the meeting of lips, and the welding of hearts.

FRONTISPIECE. See *page 196.*

THE BLUE ROOM

BY
COSMO HAMILTON

"Into the Blue Room thou shalt not look."

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
WILSON V. CHAMBERS



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THE BLUE ROOM

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There was a whoop of joy from the telephone closet in the hall, a rush back into the dining-room, and a message read in a young, round voice which trembled with something more than excitement.

“Embark this morning *Leviathan* with whole bunch Major Bill Mortimer in charge loud cheers Tom.”

Nearly performing the nose trick with a mouthful of coffee, Wainwright set down his cup, sprang to his feet, seized the girl with the dancing eyes and whirled her round the pompous and astonished room. The dead accuracy of banking had not succeeded in drying up the well of emotion in this man's soul.

Breakfast discarded, train forgotten, conferences left in mid-air, and with a damn-all feeling for the responsibilities of the day in the face of the glorious news of his son's escape alive and whole from the great graveyard of France, old man Wainwright with the heart of a boy and the love of a father dashed upstairs to his ailing wife, and shut the door. No one but she could share, or be permitted to see, his utter thankfulness.

The chauffeur, with his eyes on his watch, sat waiting in the car.

For a moment, breathless and disheveled, Martha stood alone in the big room with the slip of paper held tight against her heart. But when, with a little choking cry, she raised it to her lips it was not the name of her brother that she kissed first but of the

other man, the gallant Bill who had n't the remotest idea that, within a mile of his parental house, there lived a little girl whose constant prayers had helped to keep his name from being stamped upon German bullets.

At the first warning honk from the car Martha also took to the stairs, nipped up three at a time and tapped on the door which must not, her gift of sympathy told her, be opened.

"Fa-ther!"

"I'm not catching this train. Hang work!"

Again the honk.

"Fa-ther."

"I tell you I'm chucking the city to-day. Can't I give it a miss in balk once in a lifetime?"

And then a quiet voice from the bed at the side of which knelt old man Wainwright, — not so precious old as all that goes either. "I think you'd better go, dear."

"Yes, but Tom's coming home. My Heaven, what's the matter with a round of golf with Martha to celebrate? . . ."

Once more the honk, — the last.

"Fa-ther!"

"Oh well then!" He scrambled to his feet. He had intended to go. There was so much to be done. The financial situation in Europe was in utter chaos and it behooved American bankers to shake off parochialism and look across the narrowed Atlantic. But he was n't going to let Martha see his face until he had it under control, or the chauffeur either.

"So long, Elizabeth. Thank the good God our boy's coming back!"

But after all his head was turned away from Martha as he passed her and went down. A man needs sons and daughters before he can understand the meaning of love. He must also have built up a big business to appreciate the difficulty of letting it run without him.

From the bedroom window Martha watched the car disappear and lingered there, eyeing the trees in their first faint flush of green, and listening to the mating call of birds. She, too, wanted to let something go out of her eyes before she turned to her mother. She felt that they were blazing like beacons.

"He'll be in time," she said.

"To find me out and about, I trust." Mrs. Wainwright added up the days of the *Leviathan's* voyage. Whatever happened she must meet that ship.

"Martha!"

Beacons or not that little cry must be answered. . . . They held each other in inarticulate gratitude and wept a little for joy. Those two years had been almost too long.

"But I must n't keep you, my dear," said the mother at last. "What should I do without you?"

With visions of a long ordering list, a new cook to diplomatize and the man to see about the new awnings Martha went to the glass to straighten her hair and prepare herself for action. She turned at the door and waved a kiss. She could trust herself now, she thought.

Mrs. Wainwright's eyes were very sharp. "What other good news have you heard?" she asked.

But Martha was out before the question was finished. It's a trick all daughters have. And before going down to take hold of the reins so often and so fretfully resigned by the delicate woman whose bronchial tubes made her a frequent prisoner to her bed, the girl ran along the passage to her own room and opened the little box in which she hid her secret. . . . The snap-shot was of a tall, wiry, dark-haired man in polo kit, with one foot on the rail of a chair and the sun slanting across a laughing face. Photography failed to show the deep tan of the skin, the gray of the eyes or the touch of red in the small mustache. But it captured the virility and strength of the body, the width of chest, and the hardness of a well-developed forearm. It was Bill Mortimer playing the last of a lifetime of games before he got into khaki to play the one whose ultimate goal was set up at the further end of a field of death. . . .

Not with the skin-deep hero-worship of a child of seventeen had she secured this picture but with the sort of love that takes root in the heart of a woman and if it never bursts into blossom and eventually has by its side another plant remains forever the first and the best. In his father's house away across the meadows and the woods she had met Bill Mortimer and trembled as the arrow had winged into her heart. Perhaps a dozen times since then she had listened to his laugh, shivered at the careless touch

of his hand, stored up the easy words that he had said to her ("the little Wainwright kid"), watched him, through a blinding mist of tears, drive off to the city, knowing instinctively that he had been at home to say good-by, and then, without his even remembering that she lived, patterned the floor of Heaven with her prayers. . . . They had been heard and he was coming back! . . . "Hope sees a star and listening Love can hear the rustling of a wing."

II

It was ten o'clock before Martha had set her house in order for the day. The new cook, an Irish woman with antagonistic eyes and the manners of a prizefighter, had demanded an interview. Like many others of the same kind this had taken place in the library where at a desk at a respectful distance from her father's Martha docketed her bills and sorted away her receipts. With a back as flat as a billiard table and a face like that of one of those white horses which hauled great lorries about in the narrow streets in the roaring Forties, this terrible woman with the romantic name of Eileen McCarrow gave out her first list of grievances. Her bedroom was too small and the window faced east. She must have a new set of kitchen utensils and one of those white enamel arrangements full of drawers for tea and coffee and pepper and salt and mustard and flour and a hundred other things which help to decorate a kitchen and are never by any chance

used. The waitress might perhaps remain but the rest of the servants and especially the chauffeur must be cleared out at once. "Otherwise, as God's my judge, I'll not be stayin', an' that's flat."

To all of which, with a deep knowledge of the breed, Martha replied, "There's a nice train back to town at 12.22. If you will have your trunk packed by twelve o'clock I will have a taxi here for you." Whereupon Eileen McCarrow, a mere common bully like the rest of her type, gave one quick glance at the charming figure with the steady blue eyes, snorted and disappeared into the kitchen. "I'll be givin' der place a chance," she murmured, as she stumped away.

After one more visit to her mother to see that she had everything that she needed, Martha went out into the garden. It was grass cutting day and the two gardeners, Tony Caruso and Leonardo Benvenuti, were typical Wops and had a way, when the day was warm and nobody was keeping an eye upon them, of leaving their machines behind a zareba of trees, of making themselves particularly comfortable under their shade and discussing the virtues of Orlando and the intricacies of the League of Nations while they ate youthful onions newly plucked from the warm earth. It was very human and characteristic, but wages, like everything else, were high, and grass had a way of growing exuberantly in the spring. Being possessed of an extreme amount of moral courage Martha routed them into the open and warned them that if the

lawns were not properly cut by twelve o'clock there would be two more picturesque Italians looking for new jobs. Both of them had a healthy respect for the girl who used simple words with quiet emphasis and were very well aware of the fact that empty threats were not in her line. It was wonderful to see with what energy these two undersized, unwashed specimens of a sunny country immediately pursued the even tenor of their way. The clack of their two machines inspired all near-by birds to song.

Armed with the slip of paper which meant as much to Bill's people as it did to herself and her father and mother Martha made her way down to the road which led to the old Mortimer place, the landmark of that part of Westchester. About half a mile from her own house it lay far back from the road surrounded by trees and led up to under a long and winding avenue. Somewhere about a hundred and fifty years old, its numerous windows looked over five hundred acres of woods and farm land. A dear old rambling building upon which the hand of a vandal had never been laid, with a high Colonial portico which gave it dignity and charm, it wore an air of extreme well-being and mothered many out-houses and a low stable building with a square courtyard which had obviously been built in the days of coaching. Every inch of it reeked with history and was pervaded with the spirits of those fine Americans who had carried on the traditions of Washington. A sunken rose garden with warm

brick paths caught the eye as one approached, and a dozen great oak trees stood sentinel on the edge of a rolling lawn.

Not altogether with the approval of her good parents, to whom the extraordinary story of the Mortimers was a matter of frequent and rather starchy discussion, Martha had become the affectionate and admiring protégée of the distinguished white-haired lady who had been inspired to retire from the world at precisely the right moment. The fascination of spring for autumn and of a young girl for a woman whose life had run its active course, naturally came into this friendship, and hardly a day passed that did not find these two wandering together among the old gardens newly astir and ebullient, the one to listen eagerly to the stories about Bill which the other was only too anxious to tell. It was with the utmost pleasure therefore that Martha hurried round to break the good news which had just been received over the cable from Tom.

To Martha who rose at seven o'clock the day was no longer young. To the Mortimers it was only just beginning.

A man of elaborate portliness, important presence and canonical dignity was tapping a barometer that hung on a wide beam to the left of the front door as the girl arrived at the house, her butter-colored hair bare to the sun. By the subordinates who were ruled by him with that mixture of ingenious blasphemy and autocratic firmness which be-

longs to drill sergeants Albery was known as the greyhound, because he made a little hair go a long way. The pun was a bad one, but its effect on people who had never heard it before and who marveled at the painstaking way in which several strands of black hair were plastered upon an otherwise bald head was an instant gust of mirth. He was one of the last of a breed of butlers who regard their work as a vocation and come to it with the tradition of many butler ancestors.

Hearing a quick light step on the veranda he turned and bowed, with just the faint beginning of a respectful smile. "Good morning, Miss Martha," he said, his voice denoting a lifelong run of enviable wine-cellars.

"Good morning, Albery. Is Mrs. Mortimer down yet?"

"Not yet, Miss. Nor Mr. Mortimer neither. And there is breakfast to go, during which I must not allow them to be disturbed."

"Oh yes, I forgot that. But I've run over with great news and I thought I ought to give it at once."

Albery shrugged his shoulders and went so far as to permit himself to chuckle. "It's as much as my life's worth to advance a remark during the process of the first meal, Miss, — let the news be good or bad. But if you have an hour to spare and would be pleased to spend it in the garden. . . ."

Martha smiled, nodded, wheeled about and with the precious piece of paper on which she had scribbled Tom's message clasped tightly in her hand

went over a clean-shaven lawn and along a wide, tree-shaded road to the stables. She had never ventured to break in upon the almost religious routine of that house so early before and knowing the cut and dried ways of those two old people almost as well as Albery did, appreciated the necessity of elimination without further discussion. There was a whinny of welcome from an old hunter with a white star between his eyes and a series of movements in a line of loose boxes. The girl with the soft voice and courageous hand had many friends in that spotless place. She would spend an hour there with delight.

III

IN the room in which the famous General Barclay Mortimer was brought into the world and, eventually, at the ripe age of eighty-four departed from it, and in which Judge William Mortimer, Governor of New York State, fought death for exactly a year before being beaten in a contest which is always an unequal one, Mr. Barclay Mortimer, ex-commodore of the New York Yacht Club, was making up for breakfast.

Being now a man of sixty, who had sailed through a gorgeous and much to be deplored life with the face of Adonis and the figure of Apollo, it goes without saying that Barclay Mortimer had a standing grievance against "that damned Anno Domini," as he called it, which had laid relentless hands upon his handsome features and perfectly

balanced body. With the pathetic reluctance of a woman who has been a celebrated beauty to face the sere and yellow, he made use of every known weapon with which to disguise the brutal and disfiguring blows of the implacable hand of time. His dressing table was covered, therefore, with bottles whose mysterious liquids were known only to himself and his valet, — dyes and astringents and the rest prepared by ingenious people who catered to the vanity of frail humanity at a profit of several hundred per cent. If the daily process of making up was long and tiresome its effect, in a doubtful light, was to take ten years off Mortimer's appearance and give him the supreme satisfaction of saying to himself, as he looked at his white-haired wife across the breakfast table, "Either, my dear friend, she must have snatched you out of the cradle or you are her youngest brother."

At the moment when Martha had arrived breathless and filled with a generous desire to share her joy with Bill's parents, Barclay Mortimer was standing in front of a pier glass dabbing his well-shaped mustache with an evil smelling liquid which had been poured upon a small sponge. Crouching behind him the faithful Denham was lacing up a pair of stays which, in doing away with a slight rotundity in the neighborhood of the lower buttons of the waistcoat, gave the elderly victim the appearance of a pouter pigeon. The sunny brown of hair which should have been a benign and woolly white was a shade darker than the mustache, the

color scheme of which was to give an effect of sun bleach. The eyebrows matched the hair, whose center parting was continued down to the nape of the neck. The face had been massaged first with a small electrical instrument and then with cream of honey and finally cleaned off with a lemon flavored wash mixed with alcohol. Ultimate powder, neatly applied, had been fanned away. A thousand dollars had been paid to a French beauty doctor in New York so that Denham might achieve the secrets of all the art and craftiness of preservation and disguise, and he performed his daily task with infinite care and affection. He had been twenty years in the service of "the old buck," as he called him, and it was a matter of personal pride to turn him out looking like an actor manager of ripe age made up to play the part of a leading juvenile. The keen sense of humor that was possessed by them both lightened the hours devoted to this process of camouflage.

Having risen at eight it was ten o'clock before Mr. Barclay Mortimer regarded himself as finished, and took a last look in the pier glass that stood between the two windows of a bedroom which was the acme of comfort and was filled with delightful old pieces of Colonial furniture.

Tall and slight and graceful, dressed in a beautifully cut suit of Irish homespun golf clothes which gave out a pleasant reek of bog and tobacco, with brown stockings and white shoes with brown leather strappings which required the hand of an artist to clean, the old gentleman whose abominable past

gave him great joy to contemplate tucked a colored handkerchief into his pocket and turned with a smile. "Congratulations, Denham," he said, "I feel fifty-two and look forty-eight. You actually achieve what Canute attempted."

"Thank you, Sir," replied Denham, standing back with the air of a portrait painter. He didn't know who Canute was, and didn't care. The remark was a favorite one and he understood that it was the last word in praise. It meant that he could now retire to the servants' porch to smoke a pipe and read the morning paper with the complete satisfaction of having done his job for the day.

At five minutes past ten, as usual, the old buck left his room, went jauntily along the wide corridor that was hung with the full length portraits of his deserving ancestors, descended the stairs humming an air from "Sumurun," crossed the hall under the disapproving eyes of Mortimers who had taken life with desperate seriousness, and swung into the breakfast porch to be welcomed by an outburst of song from innumerable canaries and an enigmatical smile from Mrs. Barclay Mortimer.

The white haired lady, who was three years younger than her husband, had been down, as usual, for an hour. Having wisely decided to let nature alone and grow old gracefully she had had an hour to give to the garden, that wonderful and peaceful old garden, and had brought back with her a bunch of lilies of the valley, the most virginal and modest of all flowers. A woman built on noble

lines, tall and straight and willowy, there was all about her, despite her snowy hair, that essence of loveliness that a beautiful woman never quite loses if she is content to leave well alone. She had real dignity and charm and kindliness, a low soft laugh in which there was something suggestive of the notes of a harpsichord and at the tail end of her dark eyes a hint of ironic humor. Especially about her hands with their long thin fingers and polished nails was her breeding and fastidiousness to be detected. She permitted herself the use of one inimitable pearl ring, around which there were tender memories. There would have been no breakfast for her if she had known that Bill, the apple of her eye, was aboard the transport that was to bring him, with other members of the Headquarters staff, from Brest.

They met, these two, more like people who were newly married than those who had been married and almost wholly separated for thirty-five years. Raising her hand to his lips with an air of respectful admiration and courtliness Mortimer gave her his usual greeting. "Good morning, Madame. How charming you look!"

To which, with the faintest suggestion of amusement, she replied, "Good morning, Commodore. I return the compliment with interest."

And then followed the inevitable business, watched with extreme sympathy by the silent Albery, of escorting her to her chair, placing it for her and pushing it in,—all done with the studied

gracefulness of old fashioned comedy as though before an audience, — as indeed it was. In addition to the many canaries there were, in that glassed-in breakfast porch, a collection of parrots and parakeets, love birds in large cages and a tiny marmoset chained to a perch.

Then followed the first meal of the day, during which letters were opened and commented upon, the front pages of the papers glanced at and discussed, the morning welcome extended to a couple of extremely well-bred water-spaniels whose silky black curls had been carefully brushed and parted. An hour of a day which had no duties and few occupations was thus delightfully killed.

The underlying irony in the comedy of this felicitous scene would have given immense joy to those worldly people who had known the handsome Barclay Mortimer in the zenith of his career as a lady killer and sportsman and the lovely Lylyth as the leader of New York society on whose entrance to her box at the Metropolitan Opera House the vast audience had nearly risen to its feet.

An eccentric but very human couple this, who had been driven by encroaching years reluctantly to retire from a world that was full of things to enjoy and sensations with which to experiment and were now playing their parts sexlessly at the latter end of a marriage which they had never properly played at the beginning of it. They might still have continued separately on their way to the outpost of eternity had they not been mutually bound by two common

desires, — the one to cultivate each other's acquaintance in the old house beloved by them both, the other to bask in the smiles of Bill, whom they adored, delighted in and conspired to marry to a girl young and sweet enough to be the mother of a new line of Mortimers. To this good end, — good, that is, from their own point of view, — they were the last to take into account the rakish record of their only son, — they had their eyes on Martha Wainwright. In her they saw all the makings of a fine young reviver of their honored but recently uncared-for name, a girl born of honest and scrupulous parents, of responsible and sensible upbringing, unspoiled by wealth and fashionable schooling, who would come to marriage with an old fashioned ecstasy and that keen sense of duty which seems to have gone out with the puffed sleeve and the bustle. They divided this supreme ambition between them and while waiting for its fulfillment trod the little private stage of their own with all the zest and whimsicality that hard living had left to them.

Follies cease only with the flight of youth, — and sometimes not even then.

IV

WHEN Mrs. Mortimer rose to say "sweet-sweet" to her pet canary before going up to her boudoir to write her bi-weekly letter to Bill, the Commodore lingered in the breakfast porch.

Whether he was inspired to a genuine sentiment by the glory of that spring morning, or merely

grasped at an excuse to see whether he had not wholly forgotten his gift of saying delightful nothings to a woman, or felt the faint flicker of his old hot fire of amorousness, no one could have told and he did n't stop to discover. The fact remained that presently he placed himself in his wife's way in front of the door, and put a quiver of emotion into his well modulated voice.

"Lylyth, my dear," he said humbly and with great tenderness, "let me say for once how greatly I appreciate the privilege of this St. Martin's summer with you."

Mrs. Mortimer gave one of her low soft laughs. This little outburst was totally unexpected and was like a speech to which no cue had been provided. It did not surprise her, however, or more than lightly touch one of the easily reached spots of a vanity that age had not yet withered. He often said such things at carefully chosen moments. "My dear Barclay," she answered teasingly, "I have the mail to catch and a long letter to write. Please may I go?"

"No, no," he said, taking one of her long thin hands in both his own and holding it against his heart, — a trick that he had often practised with a certain Italian prima donna away back in '89. "No, no. Stay just for a moment. I am moved to speak sincerely, and surely there is enough room for silence in the grave?" He could just see himself in an oval glass that hung at the other end of the porch. His attitude pleased him.

"Cut it as short as you can then. I want to tell Bill about the new filly and write more tactful things about the future of the family." She let him see that she took his so-called sincerity with a pinch of salt, but made no real effort to go. She owned that there was something curiously intriguing in living under the same roof with a man who had frankly taken his pleasures elsewhere ever since the decline of their honeymoon thirty-five years ago. It was like standing in front of a fire of spent embers that was railed off by a guard.

But Mortimer was not to be put off. He had breakfasted well. He felt fifty-two and looked forty-eight. The fight over the formation of a League of Nations that was to put an end to fighting was almost over. Bill must soon be home again. He was well and happy. Under such excellent conditions it seemed a pity not to draw once more upon the fountain of his eloquence, — even if it were shrewdly understood and unappreciated. "My dear," he went on, holding his pose, "I know that you have much to forgive and many things to forget. I have not been a good husband to you. Having seen you daily now for several months and discovered in you a host of lovely qualities that escaped me in my riotous youth, I want to say how deeply I deplore my former blindness and how greatly I desire to atone, now that we have come together at last, for my many omissions."

"You speak like a book, Barclay," said his wife. "If you were always able to command such lan-

guage no wonder you were such a success with women. Some of them fall more easily to style than to brute force, — Juliet for instance.” She laughed again and drew aside. “There. Now you can get a better view of yourself in the glass.” It was perhaps a little cruel.

But still Mortimer was not put off. It is true that for the moment he was peeved at being seen through so quickly, but his irresistible sense of humor came to the rescue. He echoed her laugh, let go her hand and opened the door. “Give my love to Bill,” he said, “and tell him that I have lost four pounds by depriving myself of butter. No wonder that you were such a success, Madame. And by the way — ”

“Yes?” She turned at the door. There was a charming note of camaraderie in her voice.

“Talking of style, I have just finished editing a brief résumé of my life for the family records. Shall I read it to you to-night after dinner?”

“Oh please,” she said. “That *will* be exciting. So much that you have done has only come to me in gossip. Shall I publish it after you have gone?”

A shudder ran over Mortimer’s wasted frame. He hated to hear of death.

“Oh Lylyth!” he said, like a man who had been enjoying a bout of fencing and was pricked by an opponent who had removed the button from his foil.

She threw out a repentant hand to him, touched by his obvious horror. “Forgive me, Barclay. It was a bad joke,” and left him alone with the cana-

ries, the parrots, the little marmoset and a sudden mental picture of a procession to the old graveyard of his forbears, which made him turn as cold as a fish. He looked every day of his sixty years.

V

BUT Mrs. Mortimer's letter was never to be written.

Emerging pontifically from a door in the hall Albery came forward and met her as she was about to go up to her sanctum. "Miss Martha Wainwright has been waiting for an hour in the stables, Madam," he said as one might make a statement about the weather. Several generations of butlership had gone to the making of his perfect lack of interest. He was as a matter of fact intensely curious to know what had brought Martha over with that beacon burning in her eyes, and eager impatience had urged him to much scathing and bitter sarcasm in the kitchen.

"Why?" asked Mrs. Mortimer, sensing that the girl had something important to tell. The late afternoon was her usual time to come.

"I cannot say, I'm sure, Madam. But the young lady seemed to be very excited, if I may be allowed the expression."

"Fetch her at once, — no. I'll go myself. . . . It's Bill," she added mentally, as she went out of the sun-bathed garden and round the house and across the lawn to the stables, with a quickening of the pulse. "It's Bill. I know it is. She must have

been ordained to be the one to bring us news of him, — we, who have chosen her to be his wife.”

Reaching the stables she called with all the voice that her speed had left her, — and drew up short, stabbed by an anguished thought. It might be bad news! Bill might have come to trouble. The paper must have had something in it that she had missed.

Martha heard the cry and came out of the warm harness room that was closely hung with bridles and saddles all of which were oiled and polished. She had been standing there alone for half an hour with the star of hope blinding her with its light.

“Here I am, Mrs. Mortimer,” she said.

The lady whose face had gone as white as her hair stood very still and upright. If she was to be required to meet a blow she would take it as she had taken all the others, — with her chin up.

“It’s about Bill,” she said.

With a great struggle to show only sisterly joy, — because her feelings as to Bill must be hidden even from the eyes of his mother, Martha handed over the slip of paper that vibrated with her kisses. “A cable from Tom. It came early this morning. I have been waiting to show it to you.”

As Mrs. Mortimer read the message everything about her relaxed. She gave a little fluttering sob and over her still lovely face crept an expression that was like that of the Madonna. . . . Was it after all curious that although her only son had been

born out of love and had turned out to be a modern edition of his father he had always been the one supreme factor of her artificial life, — the apple of her eye? . . . "Thank God," she said. "We are to see him again." And she put out her hands, with a peculiar gravity, and drew the girl into her arms and kissed her. If all her plans ran smoothly and she could lead the harum-scarum Bill into settling down while he was still under the reaction of war, here was the mother of her grandson.

But she was startled to find herself holding a young thing, a moment ago so cool and aloof, whose whole body shook with a very tempest of tears. . . . This was not the relief that came to a sister, — even to one so affectionate as Martha. Then it must be for Bill. It must mean that this little girl, like so many others scattered about the earth, had set Bill up in her heart and, with something of the same love as that of a mother, had also spent those long and anxious months at the feet of God.

"My darling," she said.

And for many minutes these two women, bound by a tie that nothing could undo, remained in each other's arms, in mutual thanksgiving.

At last Martha conquered herself and drew away. No one must share her secret. "Tom and I have always been g—great pals," she said, catching her breath.

"I know, my dear, I know."

"And he's . . . , he's been through some of the worst fighting."

"I'm sure he has, quite sure."

"And he's the only son, you see, and that means s—so much to father and mother."

"Yes, indeed."

"And one has had to try to be very brave all this time for their sake."

"I know."

"So that's why I c—cried like that."

"Of course."

And in the little silence that followed, the girl earnestly examined the woman's face to see if there was the least suggestion of disbelief in her explanation, and the woman, who had great sympathy and a keen remembrance of her own heart as a child, never gave herself away. She too had had a secret and the man had never found it out. She would make it her business to see, more now than ever, that Martha should be numbered among the lucky ones. Sooner or later Martha must make some reference to Bill, and she wondered, smiling, in what way she would manage it.

"It's just like Tom to cable like that," Martha went on, with all her confidence back. "You should have seen how father took it!"

"I wish I had."

"He whirled me round the room and when he rushed up to Mother the whole house seemed to shake."

"I'm not surprised, my dear."

And then it came, and in so naïve a way as to make Mrs. Mortimer want to take the girl once

more into her arms and tell her that the secret was a secret no longer.

"I suppose Tom put that in about Major Mortimer so that I might come and tell you," she said, standing with wide eyes and a perfectly expressionless face.

But Mrs. Mortimer did not allow herself even the ghost of a smile. She lived up, in spite of great temptation, to her usual fine spirit of sportsmanship. "I suppose he did," she answered. "It was extremely thoughtful of Tom. Probably Bill's own cable has been delayed somewhere." And that was what had happened.

"I am glad to be the one to bring you such good news, Mrs. Mortimer."

"So am I, you dear thing." And one of the long thin fastidious hands rested affectionately on Martha's little fair head. "Let us go together to the Commodore. It will make him feel years younger than he does already."

And as they went back to the house arm in arm the new leaves on the twisted boughs of the old family sentinels seemed to break into applause, as though they approved of Mrs. Mortimer's choice of the mother of a new generation. And when the old buck, from his place on the veranda, saw the approach of his wife with a girl whose face he could not recognize at that distance, he preened himself, gave a fluke to his mustache and rehearsed a sentence appropriate to youth and spring.

In choosing Martha as the girl to be Bill's wife

Mrs. Mortimer had told herself and the Commodore that the only difficulty which faced them was to arrange a romantic meeting. With the natural conceit of a mother it had never occurred to her to question the fact that Martha would jump at Bill. Bill was Bill and no girl who was n't blind and dumb could possibly resist his attractions. Good Lord, he had had few rebuffs hitherto, — the bad boy. But, all the same, how much easier the bringing of these two together would be now, with love already on one side. On the other there was, because nature always stood by her precedents, and the escape from death was always followed by a desire to perpetuate, a new sentiment, a hitherto unrequired capacity for fatherhood and home-life, and, of course, the legal possession of an adoring wife in the first flush of youth. Mrs. Mortimer, knowing the male species so well, banked on that. The question as to whether it would be fair or wise to give the girl a few hints as to Bill's passionate interludes before she stood with him at the altar, and thus provide her with the chance to draw back in the event of disillusion, had never entered her mind. If the unsophisticated and romantic girl had made Bill her hero, blameless and without reproach, let him remain so. One of her tenets had always been that into the Blue Room thou shalt not look. And another that a man's life was his own although a woman's must belong wholly to the man who made her his wife.

It must be remembered that Mrs. Mortimer dated

back to that amazing period before woman's rights had been brought forward to make things more difficult.

VI

THAT evening, at the time when Martha's daily duties were over and she had gone to bed to dream of the man whose photograph was under her pillow, Barclay Mortimer and the white-haired lady went into what was called the morning room of their very proper house. It might better have been called the all-day room because it was here that a long line of masters and mistresses had always gravitated to read and talk, write letters and play backgammon, cribbage and whist. Long and narrow, with windows at both ends and a large open fireplace opposite to the arch that separated it from the more imposing drawing room, it had about it an air of comfort and relaxation which made an irresistible appeal. No ancestors frowned down from their faded frames, but every inch of the walls was covered with a valuable and delightful collection of colored prints, corner cupboards filled with old Chelsea and Spode, and gleaming Colonial cabinets behind the glass doors of which stood lines of first editions. The polished floor was covered with the hooked rugs of old New England, their quaint and curious designs in rich colors now dulled by time and use, and every one of the numerous chairs held out stiff though hospitable arms. Handmade fire screens worked with beads, illustrating Biblical scenes or

representing coats of arms, gave warmth and a little fustiness to various corners, and the mantel-shelf was crowded with delightfully ugly china figures in Sunday attitudes, early Victorian ornaments with long glass tears, and inimitable old snuff boxes which reeked with history. The whole room cried aloud for crinolines and round bare shoulders, satin beflowered waistcoats, knee-breeches, and the aroma of rose-leaves and hot toddy.

At that pathetic time of life when meals take on supreme importance as landmarks in a long unoccupied day the Mortimers had dined well. A bottle of Veuve Cliquot '06 had given the required fillip to send them through an evening without the stimulation of guests. There was also the excitement to Mortimer of reading aloud his carefully written autobiography and to Mrs. Mortimer of listening to a probably biased account of a life in which her particular part had begun and ended with a honeymoon. She looked forward with interest and amusement not only to the references to herself which must certainly come into it but to the way in which Barclay had smoothed over some of the rather doubtful episodes of his one-eyed and amorous career.

"Sit here, Madame," said Mortimer, arranging a nest of cushions at the head of a mahogany framed sofa. "I shall need the reading lamp but I will tilt the shade so that the light may not tease your eyes." He handed her to her place, arranged her skirt about her feet, put a cigarette into her long

black holder and gave her a light. He did it all with his usual mixture of courtesy and tenderness and with the air, which gave Mrs. Mortimer agonies of repressed amusement, of waiting upon someone old enough to be his mother.

"I don't need these glasses," he said, putting them on, "but the light is faulty and my handwriting a little careless." He made the apology more to himself than to his wife. He regarded this aid to failing sight with considerable distaste. Then he mounted a carefully chosen cigar in a meerschäum holder, pushed a chair a little nearer to the reading lamp, and seated himself with his manuscript on his knees. Anno Domini must have chuckled to see him, in his rather too tight dinner jacket and all the camouflage of Denham's numerous bottles. He might have looked older but he certainly would have been a less unreal figure with white hair and mustache. As it was he bore a striking resemblance to one of those wax figures of dead celebrities before which one pauses for a moment with a queer self-consciousness as though fearing to intrude.

"It's the custom of the male members of your family to write the story of their lives for the private use of their children, I believe?" asked Mrs. Mortimer.

"Yes, and not a bad idea either. It insures inaccuracy and makes us quite certain of the admiration of those who follow us. I'm afraid mine won't make such inspiring reading as the rest, though." His gleeful chuckle contradicted the note

of contrition that he put into his voice. "Bill will enjoy it. I'm sure of that,—and so will you, I hope."

"Does n't that rather depend on what you've written about me?"

Mortimer gave her a little bow. "I could write nothing about you that had n't in it the deepest admiration and respect, Madame."

"Well, I'm most comfortable and most curious. Please begin."

Like a professional pianist, hired for a tea fight, who, after trying the instrument, places her handkerchief and proceeds to take off her bracelets, Mortimer looked up from the first page. "You must understand," he said, "that the rather pedantic style is in keeping with other such documents and it is written in the third person according to precedent."

"Delightful."

He touched the shade, drew an ash tray nearer, put his fingers to his tie, and cleared his throat. He was about to have a most enjoyable evening. "'Barclay Mortimer the third,'" he began, "'was born to William and Maria Coveney Mortimer at two o'clock in the morning of the 27 of October 18 —'" the rest he swallowed. It left a nasty taste. "'A bright and remarkably attractive child, he not only received the finest education that his country could give but all the good influences of a home dominated by noble and God-fearing parents!'" He turned over a dozen pages and shot out a smile.

"I'll spare you all the details of my life and exploits at a preparatory school and Yale,—very enthralling, and come to the time when I began to count."

Mrs. Mortimer nodded. That meant her entrance into the story.

"At the age of twenty-four, he found himself, upon the lamented death of his father, in possession of the ancestral house in Westchester, a stable full of horses, four old road coaches which had frequently rumbled over the English macadam of Piccadilly and Trafalgar Square on the way to Brighton and to Dover, the fine acres of park and farmland over which at various times many of the celebrated characters of American history had galloped, and a very considerable fortune. A wealthy, high-spirited and uncommonly handsome young man, determined to wring out of life everything that it had to give, young Mortimer immediately followed the example of those whose name he bore by making an early marriage.'"

"Ah," said Mrs. Mortimer, her mind running back to that distant year when she had looked and felt as Martha Wainwright did to-day. It was like the echo of a dream.

"His beloved mother, the reluctant dowager, retired to the smaller house on the southwest edge of the estate and brought forward the beautiful Lylyth Pellew, whose family, Anglo-Saxon like that of the Mortimers, had settled about the same period in the adjoining state of Connecticut.'"

A murmur came from the sofa. "Poor little

soul, with long legs and long ringlets, a broken romance, and less knowledge of men and life than a newly fledged bird."

His deaf ear was towards his wife and so Mortimer missed these words. "The next few sentences I submit to your revision if you consider it necessary," he said, "but I will read them as written."

Mrs. Mortimer waved her hand. She had forgotten the name of the boy who had not returned her love and which like a worm in the bud had eaten her damask cheek. She had also forgotten the exact quotation, but she remembered the spirit in which she had submitted, with the docility of her time, to be "brought forward."

"Having no one else in his mind, and being anxious to conform to the established rule, young Mortimer quickly led this very suitable young lady to the altar; whereupon, having performed their respective duties by the family after a most disconcerting honeymoon under the roof of the old house and the eyes of numerous ancestors, the young couple felt the need of a change of scene. Mrs. Mortimer went to New York to stay with relatives in Washington Square and Barclay took it into his head to visit his connections in England and hunt with the Quorn and the Bicester . . . ' May I leave it like that? "

"How else? It seems to me to be a masterpiece of tactfulness, a gem of the art of elimination." But into the mind of the white-haired lady crowded memories of a distressingly unsophisticated girl, a

man of urgent desires, and a locked door, after an outburst of revolt. . . . How good had been the independence and the freedom of that metropolitan house and the kindness of those dear gay people who had introduced her to the life of New York.

“ ‘Then occurred the first of those affairs of the heart which this brief narrative must regretfully contain,’ ” read the Commodore, smiling broadly at the recollection of the amusement he had derived from throwing in the word regretfully. “ ‘Young Mortimer met and fell madly in love with Diana Conclarty, daughter of the Earl of Portrush, and for a time, it must be said, forgot the beautiful ties of home under the emotion of an episode to which only the flaming pen of a great poet could do justice or the weighty diatribes of a great judge sufficiently condemn’ That’s pretty well put, I flatter myself,” he added, looking up.

Mrs. Mortimer laughed. “Brilliant,” she said. “And so Diana Conclarty was the first, was she? Tell me about her.”

“Red hair, a skin like cream, the spirit of an unbroken colt, the physical daring of a man, the temper of the devil and moments of angelic clemency. Hey, what a life she led me, — that girl! She caught me when I was just trying my wings and left me an experienced flyer. The last time I saw her she was in Red Cross uniform and the pride and grief of having given three sons to the great sacrifice was stamped upon her face.” He raised his

hand to his forehead in salute and swallowed a lump that came into his throat. Like all supremely selfish men he could easily afford to indulge in theoretical kindness and sentiment.

"Poor brave soul," said Mrs. Mortimer, with her eyes on a framed photograph of Bill.

"Young Barclay's return to Westchester was due to an impending event of supreme importance to the future of his family. He arrived in time to pace the wide veranda of the old house to wait with strange feelings for the appearance of the doctor to murmur into his ear one or other of the two words 'boy' or 'girl.'"

"It was 'boy'," said Mrs. Mortimer, throwing a kiss to the tall figure in khaki.

"Yes, thank God, it was 'boy', and thank God again that that boy is on his way to us now. . . . 'It goes without saying that the proud and happy father stayed long enough in the place of his own birth to add his decorative and debonair figure to the little procession that eventually wound its way to the old Episcopalian Church in the village to the christening ceremony of his son and heir.'"

Mrs. Mortimer pressed her handkerchief surreptitiously to her eyes. But the Commodore had labored to awaken this emotion and paused deliberately, very much gratified. Mrs. Mortimer saw all this and laughed away her tears. "Forgive the interruption, Barclay," she said.

"Not at all, Madame. I am so glad to help you to a pleasant evening. 'After which,' " he went on,

with more gusto than ever, "a friendly discussion was held between the husband and the wife, who had by this time achieved considerable poise and a very direct vocabulary from the broadening influences of New York, and Barclay Mortimer took flight once more, this time to France, which became the scene of his second great passion.'"

"What resilience, my dear Barclay!"

"The dark-haired Bolaire, the young comédienne who drew all Paris to the Variétés to see her in "La Femme du Monsieur Boc", held him until she saw her way to permanency and the solid bourgeoisism for which her soul had always pined by marrying the proprietor of the Hôtel du Chariot d'or at Boulogne.'"

"H'm, how curious."

"No, she came from Brittany. Thrift and caution were in her blood. . . . 'Whereupon, the temporarily wounded and disillusioned Barclay returned once more to Westchester, filled with an overwhelming desire to put young Bill upon a pony and take a hand in teaching him the ways of a gentleman. It may be added that he hoped at the same time to gain comfort and consolation at the hands of his wife and plant something more fruitful in the earth than wild oats. He found that, during this absence of several years, Mrs. Mortimer had developed into one of the personalities of New York and was the undisputed leader of the most exclusive set in the City, a vivid and beautiful young woman whose doings and sayings were

chronicled in the newspapers and whose house in Fifth Avenue was the center of attraction.' ”

“ Thank you, Barclay. I could n't have written that better myself.”

“ Yes, but wait a minute. Here follows a paragraph which you may wish to take out and of course I shall bow to your decision.”

“ What is it? ”

He read again. “ ‘ He was, however, somewhat piqued to find that she had not been altogether inconsolable at his long and selfish absence and had, indeed, established an interest which made life very desirable and helped her to pass her grass-widowhood without bitterness.’ . . . Shall that stand? ”

“ Word for word, my dear Barclay. It's perfectly delicious.”

“ ‘ The death of his mother at this period of his life,’ ” he went on, “ ‘ held Mortimer to America longer than he desired to remain. He was however bound to confess that the sight of his boy, the very spit of himself, touched him on that side of his nature which circumstances had not permitted him to develop. It was then that the seeds were sown of the deep affection which ever afterwards existed between father and son. For the first time the Mortimers made several appearances together in society to everybody's surprise, agreed again to differ on nearly every subject which came up for discussion and separated once more. This time Mortimer spread his wings for Italy. . . . ’ ”

“ Italy, — ah yes. The Villa Fiora. Someone

sent Bill a series of very pretty water-color sketches of what seemed to be a most romantic spot."

There came a deep sigh followed by a reminiscent laugh. "'Here he very quickly found himself in the midst of an intrigue which lasted longer than any of the others. The discretion which had to be exercised with this dear lady taught him most of the rules of diplomacy which afterwards stood him in such good stead. Eventually the little affair was discovered, there was a fracas, Mortimer was flung from a balcony, and as soon as his broken arm was mended, took up his residence in London.'"

"Was she worth a broken arm?"

Mortimer nodded and closed his eyes for a moment. "She was worth breaking everything for, including the Commandments. A rare and noble character, Lylyth, with a deep streak of piety."

"Piety!"

"Paradoxically enough perhaps, yes, — though I ought to say that she kept it well in the background. As beautiful as her sunny country, she died of a broken heart and an attack of pleurisy. God rest her sweet soul!"

"She certainly had a nice taste for drawing," said Mrs. Mortimer, in a perfectly even voice. "We missed the sketches very much."

"Thank you," said Mortimer, who felt that these pictures would never have been painted had he not been the Paolo to this Francesca. "And now I think that a little light refreshment has been earned by us both and we will raise our glasses in silent

tribute to the past that we have unearthed to-night. How true it is that nothing gives to people of ripe age such exquisite pleasure as to gloat over the misdeeds of their youth!"

He rose and made a graceful line for the tray which Albery had placed upon an octagonal table.

And as Mrs. Mortimer watched this man of transparent egotism who took such an artistic pleasure in placing himself in the spotlight, she told herself that she regretted less than ever having been "brought forward" all those years ago, because Bill was her compensation, — Bill who was at that moment aboard the ship that was heading for home, — and Martha Wainwright. History repeats itself and this girl also would presently be brought forward, but not as Mrs. Mortimer had been. Love would make the story a very different one.

With marvelously steady hands Mortimer brought back two liqueur glasses of green Chartreuse and his wife joined him in drinking to many youthful misdeeds which provided her too with precious memories.

VII

AFTER which, with a lubricated throat, the old man continued to enjoy himself.

"Mortimer then commenced to develop the sporting instinct of his many-sided character. He had the leisure to do so because he was for the moment free of women. He became a famous swordsman, a distinguished whip, a well-known

polo-player and the owner of a yacht which in those days was called palatial by the little scribblers of society chit-chat. He owned and sometimes drove the road coach which left London every day for Guilford and bought a house in Mayfair to which the young aristocracy of England came at all times. He was *ami intime* in the most exclusive circles and his colors were frequently to be seen in the races for which he entered his horses. Then came the great scandal of 1899 . . . ’”

“I was looking forward to that,” said Mrs. Mortimer. “It seemed to be a little overdue.”

She was thanked by a roguish glance. . . . “When Colonel Alistair McDuff brought his infamous action for divorce against Lady Doreen and cited Barclay Mortimer as co-respondent. It occupied the attention of the courts when the London season was at its height. The case was tried before Mr. Justice Dearborn, the most advertised counsel took it in hand and the names of the witnesses made a list which would have been epoch-making even when attached to a charity performance under the patronage of Royalty. Lady Doreen put up a most courageous and witty defense. Her cross-examination, during which she lashed the prosecuting counsel with her well-known sarcasm, sent London into fits of laughter. Mortimer also, of course, denied the soft impeachment and being at that time in the very prime of his looks was the object of much admiration. He worked off one or two epigrammatic remarks which delighted the cynics and

the intellectuals and caused the Victorians to shiver in their side-spring boots. But his record as a heart breaker was ranged against him and the evidence was too strong to refute. The verdict was in favor of the Colonel who obtained a decree nisi with the custody of the child. Lady Doreen, whose position had hitherto been absolutely secure, sank down to that indescribable set in semi-society which included all the doubtfuls and the also-rans, while Mortimer with his faithful Denham found it advisable to dig up his European roots and return to his native land.' "

"To my intense regret I missed all that," said Mrs. Mortimer. "The New York papers contented themselves with only the briefest accounts."

"Luckily I have the full reports in one of my scrap-books. I will show them to you."

"Please do. I find the new novels very anaemic."

Mortimer was flattered, bowed his acknowledgments and returned to his pages. "By that time Bill was a strapping lad of fifteen, who had inherited much of his father's good looks and manners. He was the ringleader of all the trouble at Hotchkiss. Mrs. Mortimer, at the zenith of her loveliness, continued to conduct herself with such skill and discretion that her numerous intrigues entirely escaped discussion.' "

"I object to the word 'numerous,' Barclay! Oblige me by making it 'occasional.' "

"With pleasure," He did so. "During the

period that followed Mortimer was in New York when Mrs. Mortimer was in the country and in the country when Mrs. Mortimer was in New York. They met from time to time, of course, and having so amicably agreed to differ on every conceivable subject that quarreling was out of the question, became excellent friends. It was arranged that Bill should spend the summer holidays with his father and the winter holidays with his mother. The yacht, the *Iolanthe*, was brought into American waters and father and son enjoyed many cruises together. It was during this year that Barclay Mortimer revived the interest in coaching and to the joy of democracy frequently tooled a spanking team of bays up Fifth Avenue in the middle of the afternoon. With Bill seated at his side with a small edition of his father's white tall hat cocked over his right eye they made a noticeable picture.' "

"And away went the last shreds of my maternal influence," said Mrs. Mortimer.

"And Bill became a gentleman under mine," said his father proudly. "The backwash of the London scandal followed Mortimer to New York, and as the scrupulous families failed to include him in their invitations, he became a patron of the drama. It was generally said that the magnet which drew him nightly to the stage box of Wallack's Theatre was a blond small person who called herself Lorna Doone. Be that as it may, this return to the thrall-dom of femininity did nothing to disturb the beautiful friendship which had sprung up between Morti-

mer and his son, and to the credit of the older man it must be said that he endeavored very earnestly to inculcate into his son the principle of "Do what I say but for God's sake don't do what I do." "

"Which did nothing but appeal irresistibly to my poor dear Bill's terribly keen sense of humor," put in Mrs. Mortimer, now well into her fourth cigarette.

"Too true," said Mortimer, with a chuckle. "Then followed a time during which Mortimer, having discovered Europe, became the new Columbus of America. He spent one winter in Florida aboard the *Iolanthe*, and revelled in the gorgeous beauty of its golden sunsets and sunrises,—with Lorna Doone. He was carried away with enthusiasm for California where he wandered among the old Missions—with Lorna Doone. Colorado left him speechless and he was greatly fascinated with Hawaii where—with Lorna Doone—the peculiar sadness of the native music always turned his thoughts to Bill, around whom he began building up many pet ambitions. It was perhaps a sign of middle age that he found himself dwelling on the future of his only son with a growing desire that he should take the name of Mortimer back into usefulness and carry on the tradition of his ancestors in a manner which he himself had failed to do, and his letters to Bill on his sentimental journey through his hitherto unexplored native land were perfect masterpieces of parental excellence. . . ."

"Which," interrupted Mrs. Mortimer again,

"when read to his Fidus Achates awoke Homeric laughter." She could n't resist the temptation to work in this sentence in the sort of language so dear and so easy to the old buck.

"How sad! . . . 'In 1902 he escorted Bill to Yale, spent one emotional evening among the memories of his own student days, endeavored to instill into the mind of his son the lofty ambitions which had inspired the boy's grandfather and great-grandfather, and before sailing for Europe settled a nice little pension upon his most recent companion whose new first night he witnessed in New York. There he had the satisfaction of seeing Charles Frohman "present" Miss Lorna Doone in a play called "Goodbye Forever."'"

"How appropriate!" said Mrs. Mortimer.

"I saw to that, Madame. . . . 'Then followed several years during which this incorrigible philanthropist devoted himself almost wholly to racing. He established himself at Epsom, formed a stable expertly selected from the best brood mares of the time and had the satisfaction of winning the Grand National in 1904 with Lysistrata and the Derby with Tacitus. It was at his father's Queen Anne house at the edge of the Downs that Bill made his début as a gentleman rider and as a man of sentiment. The trainer's daughter, Lilly Hastings . . .'"

"Lilly Hastings! So she was the first!"

"... was very fair with great blue eyes and a mouth like a rosebud, and the charming idyl that was enacted in and around that old Surrey

place, which had belonged to one of the partners in Coutts's bank, proved to Mortimer finally, though reluctantly, that his son was a true chip of the old block. The boy was instantly sent back to Yale, and the admonition that he took with him would have done credit to the elder Chesterfield. Hope springs eternal in the human breast, however, and Mortimer, not yet old Mortimer by any means, started again that series of letters to his boy which unfortunately the world will never see, but which, if they had been published in volume form, must have become the text book for the guidance of youth. They were filled with wisdom and sanity, kindness and fine thoughts.' "

"You don't exaggerate, Barclay. Bill showed me some of them. They were masterpieces of style and sentiment. One of them almost spoilt a little affair that I was about to undertake, — it was so filled with religious fervor."

"You're very generous, my dear Lylyth. And I am all the more happy to ask you to listen to the following tribute. 'Mrs. Mortimer, now in her forty-second year, came out of a rest cure in time to be present in the royal enclosure at Epsom to see her husband lead in Tacitus. The drama of that great moment, when Mortimer carried off the blue ribbon of racing, was enhanced by the sight of his wife, slim and sweet and looking not a day over thirty, with the six foot Bill at her side. Mortimer would have fallen in love with her but for the fact that among the party of friends who had come

over with her to London was young Alton Gramercy, who seemed to have the right to carry his wife's vanity bag. Nevertheless, Old Court was thrown open to Mrs. Mortimer and her friends, and Bill renewed his riding. Sadly enough Lilly Hastings had become Mrs. Simpkins with several young Simpkinses, but Bill's roving eyes were consoled by the flower-faced daughter of a near-by squire, and Mortimer began to see that his favorite dream was less and less likely to be realized. Bill was evidently not going to be added to the family list of great national characters.' "

"We'll see about that," said Mrs. Mortimer to herself.

"Only once between that time and 1914 did anything unusual break the delightful equability of the life of Barclay Mortimer. In the autumn of 1909, by which time Barclay was fifty years of age, the hand of fate, which had so constantly left him alone, was stretched his way, and just to show that, after all, there is little favoritism in the world, it caught our good friend by the scruff of the neck and flung him on to the small of his back. Appendicitis was the cause of it. An immediate operation was necessary, and for some days Mortimer trembled on the verge of death. At that time he was living in a very beautiful house in the Avenue Wagram, Paris. Bill was in London, having taken over his father's racing stable, and Mrs. Mortimer was in Italy pursuing the curious policy of standing in the footprints of saints.' "

“Not at all curious. I was just at the age when sinners begin to repent because sinning has passed them by!”

Mortimer laughed and sighed and continued. “‘Telegrams were sent to them and they rushed to the bedside of one who had hitherto escaped all the ordinary forms of punishment which humanity generally gets when it asks for it and sometimes when it does n’t. While the angel of death hovered over that house, quietly and indifferently waiting for orders, the mother and son watched at the bedside, — Bill, who adored his father and treated him more like a boon companion than a parent, with the first prayer in his heart that had been there for many and many a year, and Lylyth, still beautiful and still fighting Anno Domini with every conceivable trick that is known to beauty doctors, with a certain small thrill of emotion which came to her at the sight of the man on his back who had always stood so triumphantly on his feet.’”

He was obliged to stop for a moment. The tragedy and pathos of all this moved him almost to tears. Also he was a little puffed.

During the little pause, not unwelcome, the white-haired lady sent her thoughts back to that absurd bedroom with its painted furniture and cupid covered ceiling and the terror-stricken man with several days’ growth of red and gray beard on his usually spotless chin, who was so fearful of death.

“‘The natural resilience which had carried Mortimer through all his adventures came to his

rescue once more. He did death out of a new victim, made a wonderful recovery, tightened the bonds which existed between himself and his son by several weeks of the closest intercourse and discovered many charming characteristics in his wife which he had not taken the trouble hitherto to find out. They were good weeks, those in that Paris house, and anyone seeing those three together as they drove out on fine evenings to dine at the Casino at Enghien would have imagined that the greatest devotion existed between them. Mortimer would have been very happy to have continued this relationship into the future and have become domestic for the first time in his life.' "

"I wonder!"

"Yes, yes, it's true, Madame, on my oath. . . . 'He was even filled with a warm desire to dig up his European roots permanently and return with his wife to the old house in Westchester, but when he broached the subject to her and was told with a charming smile that there was another interest . . .'"

"The last, the very, very last!"

"'. . . he bowed and laughed and said au revoir, escorted her to the train-de-luxe which left for Italy that night and went back with Bill to the old Surrey house on the edge of the Epsom Downs. Together they continued to race until the great black cloud, about which Lord Roberts had so persistently and so urgently warned the British Government, finally burst on the fourth of August 1914.' "

“ Ah, you ’ve come to that awful day! ”

“ Just as that awful day will forever come back to us, my dear. . . . ‘ It was too much for Barclay Mortimer to see his old friends the French and the British on the edge of complete ruin without lending a hand. Instantly, therefore, he established an ambulance unit and devoted his wealth and personal energies to its efficiency. Bill, imbued with the same spirit, collected his mother, took her to London, got into the stampede of Americans who were anxious to get back, . . . ’ ”

“ Shall I ever forget that mêlée, that football scrum! ”

“ ‘ eventually caught a boat, and being aware of the fact that the United States would not be able to stand aloof from the European cataclysm whatever her present views might be, joined that body of excellent and far-seeing Americans who made the word Plattsburg stand out in golden letters in the history of the United States. Thus, when the hour came for the Stars and Stripes to take its place among the banners of the Allies, Bill and his friends were among the first to be commissioned into that great army which poured in long brown streams into the pock-marked fields of France and turned the scales against Germany. ’ ”

“ My own dear Bill! ”

“ ‘ He sailed in 1917 and served with conspicuous ability and devotion to duty until November 1918, when, unfortunately, the reins were taken out of the hands of fighting men and controlled once more by

those very politicians whose lack of vision and professional selfishness had permitted the black cloud to grow and give the knockout blow to civilization. He remained with the army of occupation, watching with the deepest disgust all the pettifogging parish pumpism which interfered with the triumph of the Allied arms, took the sword out of the hands of Foch and very nearly undermined the superb sacrifice of fighting men by the attempt to establish a League of Nations before peace had been forced upon Germany. Fretting his soul out on the banks of the Rhine he watched with amazement and chagrin the substitution of self-filling pens for machine guns, and listened to the cackling of foolish creatures blown out like toads with vanity, for several weary months.' ”

“And the wonder of it was,” broke in Mrs. Mortimer, on whom every reference to Bill in this curious document acted electrically, “that his letters from Coblenz did n't get him court-martialed.”

“Probably the censor was his friend, Madame. And now for the pages that bring us up to the present moment. You're not fatigued, or bored, I trust?”

“No, no. It is all intensely interesting to me. Please go on.”

“Very well then. . . . ‘In the meantime his father, after five years of strenuous work, during which time he had poured his money and his spirit into his ambulances, said good-by to poor broken France, made his way once more across those

three thousand miles of water which no longer divided America from her sister countries and took up his residence permanently under the roof of his ancestors. Here he was joined by the lady whose hair had gone white beneath the uniform cap of a Red Cross nurse, which she had worn from that terrible hour when those gray hordes ran amuck through Belgium and only removed when the news of a false peace burst upon a tired world and set all the bells ringing for something about which there was very little to rejoice. There was something not a little whimsical in the reunion at last of the Old Rip and the woman who had really never been his wife, both of whom had lived up to their tradition under the stress of a huge and beautiful sympathy for the people who had shown them friendship and for the countries in which they had enjoyed so much happiness. . . .’ Do you like the word ‘whimsical’ there, Madame?”

“Oh yes, I think so. It would n’t be quite true to write ‘pathetic’, would it?—although it might look better to Bill’s children, perhaps. Think it over some day.”

“I will,” said Mortimer. He read again. “‘They joined forces finally when both were driven into the realization that they were to be laid on the shelf and wait with becoming patience for that inevitable hour when death should beckon to them and they would be obliged to follow. It goes without saying that they met under the old family roof with much mutual respect. In the affair of the

war, at any rate, they had played the game, forgotten self, laid their little indulgences aside. They saw themselves, luckily, with a certain sense of humor, war-worn and time-worn, and like thoroughbred horses no longer able to join the hunt. They looked at each other from adjoining boxes with eyes full of pleasant reminiscence, unregretful, uncomplaining, satisfied with having had a devilish good time and very ready to make each other's acquaintance, mutually aware of the fact that they had, however, proved themselves worthy of becoming acquainted. Passion had gone out of their lives, the desire to compete with the younger people had fallen like autumn leaves. The world was no longer with them. They had become bystanders, lookers on, critics, not warped and not without sympathy for the others who followed in their footsteps and occupied their places. The spirit of adventure which had pervaded both of them had left them, and they came together at last with an enforced sexlessness which neither of them regretted. They were in every sense of the word companions, made more companionable from the fact that with the frankness of friends they could compare notes as to their indiscretions, and make plans for the happiness and comfort of their only son, for whom they had reserved the best of all their love.' "

He read these last words with a voice broken with very genuine emotion, rose, removed his glasses which were befogged with tears, bent over the white-haired lady who had never permitted the suspicion

of scandal to be attached to her name, never once attempted to interfere with his philandering or to disturb the precious friendship which had always existed between himself and Bill, and raised her hand deferentially to his lips.

"Madame," he said, "out of all this one fact emerges like a monument."

"And what is that, Barclay?"

"Your sportsmanship, my dear."

VIII

It was not late, but the hour had come for bed. Mrs. Mortimer always read for an hour before going to sleep, and the Old Buck placed himself in the hands of Denham for an anti-rheumatic treatment before a final disappearance for the day.

While he gathered up the pages written with that characteristic mixture of freely acknowledged egotism and persistent satire which he had carried with him always and still clung to as an aid to his bluff of middle-age, Mrs. Mortimer went over to one of the windows and pushed it open.

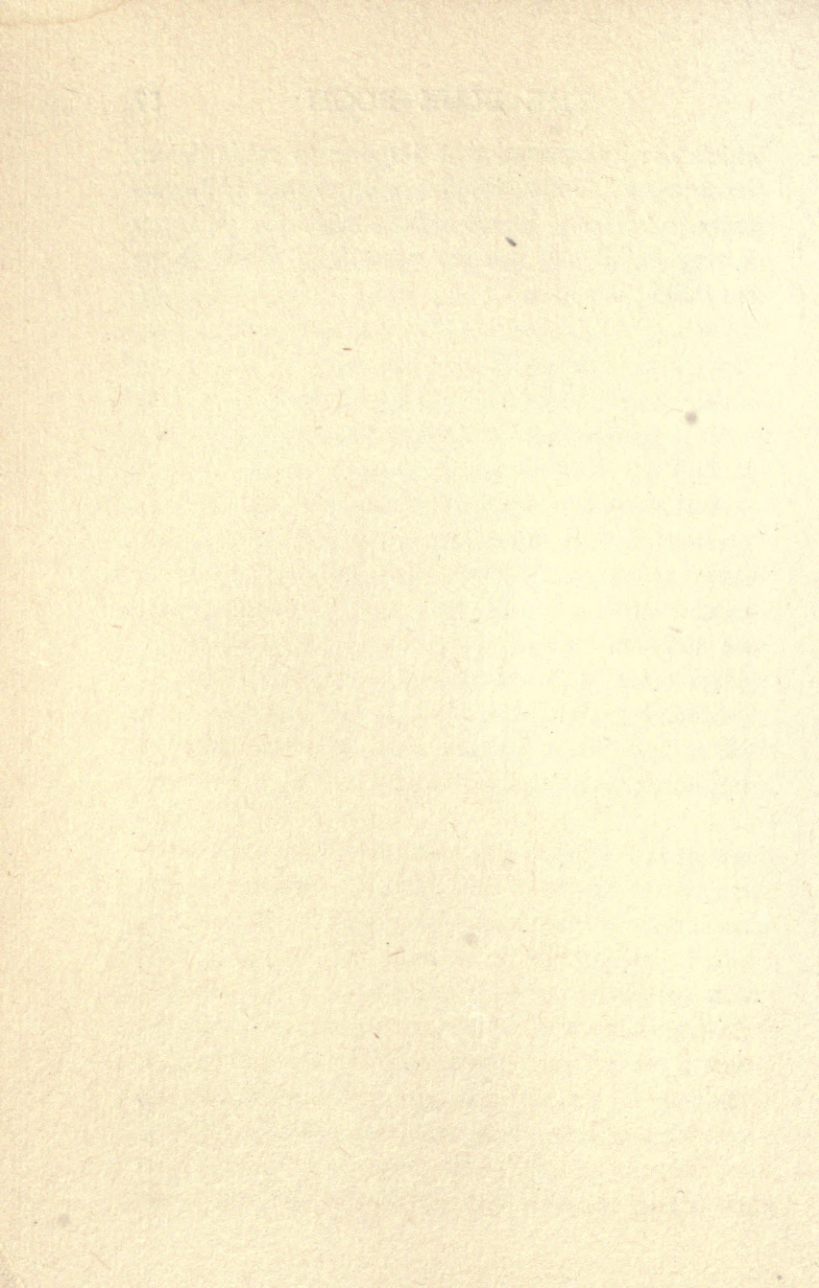
The reading of this scenario of her husband's life had set all her memories on the wing like a flight of newly released pigeons. Old half-forgotten scents and scenes and faces, words and places and names had been brought back to her vividly. Men who had once been all-important to her happiness had stood before her again in all the pride and glory of love and youth. Far-away incidents in her long leadership of society, triumphant and envied, had

added a beat to her pulse and a touch of color to her cheeks. It had been an exciting evening, a moving picture of people and feelings now lying in the limbo of an unreturnable past. But the image which remained most clearly in her mind was the one of herself, so like Martha Wainwright as to be almost uncanny, being brought forward, — the words stuck, — to become the wife of Barclay Mortimer, the mistress of his house and the mother of his son. And as she looked out at the dark woods which hid the solid and scrupulous Wainwright home from her sight she asked herself, for the first time with a sudden twinge of conscience, if, after all, there was not something very cruel and almost criminal in her plan deliberately and in cold blood to place this good little girl in a position in which her story might be repeated, in spite of the fact that Martha would walk to the sacrifice with love in her heart. Here was Bill, "a very naughty boy," older by many years than this unsophisticated child. He would bring to the partnership, if the scheme succeeded, no idealism, nothing of first love, not one atom of freshness. The husks of many affairs with women would hang about him, and as he had inherited much of the susceptibility of his father, there was no guarantee that his domestic felicity, so called, would not be forgotten at the sight of any pretty face. Here was this worldly house to which Martha would be brought, utterly devoid of the environment of duty and the example of honesty which pervaded her own home, and here would be the

Old Rip and his nominal wife conducting a comic-pathetic companionship which must be a constant puzzle to a girl whose own father and mother were on very different terms. It would be like transplanting a wild rose to a hot-house, or binding a hymn-book in the covers of Boccaccio. . . . With the thought of what she herself might have been if she had married the man of her undiscovered love, the white-haired lady, stirred by the reading of this unmoral history, began to ask herself whether it was fair and permissible to shape things in such a way that this dear sweet girl might repeat the story that she had just listened to, and having given a necessary heir to the family, go off on a similar series of tangents as soon as the inevitable disillusion set in. And it would set in, she feared, because, being human, Martha would soon discover the existence of a Blue Room in Bill's life and would find it the one room of all into which she would be most eager to peer.

Lingering at the window and looking out at the dark quiet woods behind which stood the house which Jonathan Wainwright had built by the sweat of his brow Mrs. Mortimer pictured Martha asleep in her virginal room dreaming of her hero who was blameless and without reproach, and waiting with a fluttering heart for his return, hope seeing a star and listening love hearing the rustling of a wing. But when she turned back into the room and saw Bill's face in the photograph and his careless attractive eyes fixed upon her with something in them

which she interpreted as a longing to settle down, she threw aside her scruples and her unselfish sympathy. "I have found a little wife for you, my darling boy," she said to herself. "Come home and build your nest."



PART II

I

HAVING shaken hands with the hall-porter and the elevator man and said cheery things to both, Bill Mortimer stood grinning in the middle of all the kit that had been dumped into his sitting room. And there he remained for several moments wondering, as he looked about and saw that everything was exactly as he left it, even to the pile of letters that he had put under a small bronze figure of Venus and forgotten to answer, whether the last two years in France had ever happened. This comfortable and aloof room, filled with permanent personal things, each one of which had its peculiar interest, made all the quick-changing incidents out of which he had had the luck to emerge seem to be part of an hallucination. He must have read them all as having happened to some other man or dreamed about them during a much disturbed night. . . . Here, in the same places, with the same air of always having been, was everything that spelt Bill Mortimer. His books and pictures, golf clubs, polo clubs, guns in a glassed-in rack, writing desk all

untidy as he had left it, huge sofas on the cushions of one of which he thought he could still see the little dent where the golden head of Birdie Carroll had rested a few nights before he sailed; the framed photographs of several charming girls; the Welsh dresser with its cut glass decanters and boxes of cigars; the pictures of his race-horses with a collection of rosettes pinned to their frames; the piano over whose keys the soft fingers of Susan Hatch had so often wandered and out of which Jeanne Dacoral had drawn the uneasy music of Heller's "Sleepless Nights" and the gamin stuff of Paris cabarets; the full length portrait of his father by Shannon and his mother by the young Italian artist who had put a bullet through his brain because he could not win her lips, — here they all were, as though he had gone away a few hours before, stamped with his personality, docketed in his mind with dates and sensations and sentiments. . . . Was it possible that he had been away from them all, and all that they meant in his life, for two solid years of kaleidoscopic events, the blurred impressions of which were of indescribable row, of almost comic discomforts, of chaotic movements, and of men's laughter and screams? . . .

He stepped over the shabby fat roll of his sleeping kit, which bulged with boots, went to one of the windows and opened it, and heaved a sigh of deep content. . . . New York, — with its hum of traffic rising up from the polished surface of Fifth Avenue. The Plaza with all its windows gleaming,

standing out against the black velvet of the night like the giant's castle of a child's dream. . . . He gazed out at the familiar sight with a curious thrill. In the days that were so amazingly remote and which seemed like yesterday, he never remembered consciously to have noticed this scene, any more than he could say that he had been affected by the song of the traffic and the characteristic scent of the City. It is only after a long absence from a town or a wife that the charm of either comes upon a man with surprise.

Then he shook himself and laughed a little and turned round to his friend. "Demobilized, — at last," he said.

The other man, on whose slight figure even the beltless, musical-comedy uniform of the Royal Flying Corps looked almost smart, helped himself to a stiff whisky. "In my case, old bean, that's not the word."

"What is it then?"

"Demoralized," he replied, without cynicism and without bitterness, in the same feelingless tone as he might have said denationalized. And then, with the inimitable indifference of the keenly interested Englishman, he started on a tour of the room and shot out quiet and pertinent comments as he went.

"Tacitus, by Jove! I won a very necessary twenty quid on that horse when I was a nipper at Eton. A good Derby, that."

"I was there when my old man led him in. I shall never forget his face," said Bill. "Ever

imagine the sort of expression a battery major on the verge of shell shock would wear on receiving a chit appointing him to Headquarters Staff? ”

Teddy Jedburgh shot out an appreciative laugh. He had seen it — once. The story of the various rosettes was read in a glance. Then he passed in review the photographs of Bill's little friends. “Very charming bits of fluff, old thing,” he said. “Hearty congrats.” He paused before the oil painting of Barclay Mortimer in hunting kit. “Who's the man who ought to have been a Duke? ”

“My father,” said Bill, with very real pride.

“No wonder you're such a dashed good looking sportsman, Bill. And the beautiful lady with eyes that would make a saint forget his halo? ”

“My mother,” said Bill.

Teddy bowed to the canvas. “Some jokers have all the luck. Why did you wire to two such unique parents not to meet you in town to-night? ”

“Selfish reasons,” said Bill. “I wanted to save it for the old homestead.”

“I see. Quite. . . . Well, you certainly know how to do yourself proud, old bean. One could be very comfortable here. May I see the rest of your bachelor perch? ”

With almost boyish pleasure in what he had learned to understand was enthusiasm on his friend's part Bill opened a door. “Dining-room,” he said, and led the way through an arch into a booklined cubby hole. “For the education of va-

lets. I don't read. And now come along here. . . . My bedroom, with dressing room on one side, bathroom on the other. Here's your bedroom for as long as you like to use it."

"Thanks most awfully. And these stairs?"

"Up to roof garden."

"Roof garden!"

"Yes. Come up. Mind your head."

"Great Scot," said Teddy Jedburgh, drawing his breath.

The house was high and its roof was neck and shoulders above those of the adjoining buildings. Away below, north, east, south and west lay the great, ugly, fascinating City, a very Gulliver's city, with its other erections vying in an endeavor to stick their flat heads in among the stars. Some were dark blots against the sky, some were fairy-like and almost transparent with a thousand glistening eyes. Alongside the Park, with its intersecting roads and belts of trees, the great Avenue ran, alive with the head and tail lights of what seemed to be fast moving fireflies. An arch across which was stretched a necklace of beads stood a little way to the right under the steady glare of searchlights. It might have been the entrance into the Realm of Moving Pictures erected especially for Theda Bara.

"You may thank all your gods for the Atlantic," said Teddy, at last. "What an unholy joy the Huns would have taken in dropping bombs on this!"

"The Atlantic and the British Tommy," said Bill. "Yes."

He led the way down and back to the sitting room, where they found a Jap valet, with a face as shiny as his alpaca jacket. All that kit lying about meant work and there was a sour glint in his slits of eyes.

"Shall we feed in or go out somewhere?"

"Is it all the same to you?"

"Yes, old man."

"Then let's go out. The call of this city is in my blood. Little old New York, eh? Watch me paint it red. But first I'll sample your bathroom, if I may. I want hot water, and bath salts, and a mat soft to the feet, and scented soap, and every other little thing like that. After which, having shed uniform for evening clothes I'm out for caviare and the bubbly and the horrid music of a Jazz band, and if you can put me in the way of a dear sweet thing with a laughing mouth and pacifistic notions, I shall ask nothing more. . . . I salute you, Civilization." He did so as a veteran pays tribute to the dead, took off his cap and chucked it to the far end of the room.

Bill grinned again. "Itoto, fix the bath for Lord Edward Jedburgh."

Teddy waited until the little oily man had oozed his way out. "Major Jedburgh, if you don't mind," he said, with unexpected gravity. "My father has sold all the anchors that held us to a country that's about to be divided up by the La-

bor Leaders. He and I are nomads, like the rest of us. That Lord stuff has been wiped off the face of the earth by old man Krupp."

II

BILL chose the Ritz for dinner because there he could show Jedburgh the most cosmopolitan mixture of human various to be found in New York. Like the London Savoy it draws people from every grade of life, from the astonishing blondes of moving picture fame to the elaborate cocottes with the manners of grandes dames; from the nice suburban people of transparent rectitude who have come in for the evening, to the wispy debutantes trying very hard to be mistaken for ladies of easy virtue, — with some success.

The band was not Jazz, but an orchestra of picked musicians, and it played delightfully under the leadership of a man who used his violin with masterly carelessness and gave the impression of being a high diplomat who had taken up music as a hobby. French, Italian, Belgian and British uniforms were to be seen everywhere, by the side of frocks devoid of backs, and the atmosphere of the room, which struck Jedburgh as being like a great Wedgwood bowl turned outside in, was exactly what his mood desired.

The two men did themselves well, but as both of them had been up since five o'clock that eventful morning and roof gardens were deserts until the theaters emptied they left at half past nine and walked home along the almost lonely Avenue.

Bill let himself in to his apartment, but was held up on the threshold by the night elevator man, whose effusive greetings were not, and ought not, to be cut short. And so Teddy Jedburgh went into the sitting room alone.

His eyes were immediately caught by the living representation of a picture that he had cut out of *Le Petit Parisien* and tacked to the wall of his quarters. . . . Curled up on the sofa in front of the fireplace, her hat was stabbed to one cushion and her small fair head was deep into another. Long eyelashes made fans upon her cheeks, and between her red lips, which were slightly apart like those of a sleeping child, a row of very perfect teeth gleamed. The fingers of one small hand touched the floor and the other, palm upwards, lay in her lap. The fact that one shapely leg in a black silk stocking was charmingly disclosed made the whole alluring picture French.

The R. A. F. Major, who had been sent to the United States to assist in winding up the work of the British Mission, imagined for a moment that he was dreaming true, and gazed at the little figure incredulously. But when he heard Bill's cheery "good night" and anticipated the imminent banging of the door with the feelings of a man who hates sacrilege, he tiptoed back and held up his hand.

"Sssh!" he whispered, "we're entertaining an angel unawares."

Bill needn't have been surprised, because in the old days before the war he had rarely returned to

his rooms without finding one or other, and sometimes both, of his latest engrossments waiting for him. At the moment he was, however, unprepared for a visitor and had forgotten exactly who was most likely to have discovered his name in the evening paper, upon the list of returning officers. Still wearing his hat he went forward, treading like a cat on hot bricks, with Jedburgh in close attendance, and bent over the sofa.

"It's Susie Hatch," he said. "Dear little soul. Is n't it nice of her to look me up like this?"

With a twinge of inappropriate jealousy Jedburgh watched him go down on one knee and kiss the sleeper on the lips.

The eyelids lifted, two round blue eyes stared for a moment blurred with sleep, a cry of "Bill" rang through the room and a pair of arms were flung out to clasp a willing neck.

"Lucky devil," said Jedburgh, and walked away to the cigar boxes.

"Just by accident I saw your name and came round on the off chance. . . . it's like the old days, Bill. . . . oh, my dear!"

"She's crying," said Teddy to himself. "My God, why was n't I wise enough to tack on to a little human thing whose tears would burst for me?"

With the delicacy of a man of tradition upon whom even war had not had the whole of its coarsening effect the man whose father had sold his landmarks drifted quietly out into the hall and shut the door. And there he stood on the cold marble

facing the elevator shaft with an unlighted cigar between his teeth, for an interminable ten minutes, —cursing his pre-war aloofness and determining once again to make up for lost time now that, more by luck than judgment, he had missed the bullet upon which his name had been stamped.

At last the door opened. "My dear chap," said Bill, ruefully.

"Perfectly all right, old thing, perfectly all right. Do as you would be done by, eh? How well they build these places here."

"How well they build some of you fellows over there," said Bill. "Come in and be introduced."

"I'd like to."

The girl was kneeling on the guard that made a seat in front of the fire. She needed the looking glass by which to powder her nose and replenish the health upon her lips. She was a mere slip of a thing, startlingly young to be flying alone, but as self-assured as a quack-medicine merchant among a crowd of village turnips. She had the profile that goes with those boyish erect women who swing along in triumphant procession in Grecian frescoes.

"Susie," said Bill, touching her elbow, "I want you to know Teddy Jedburgh, a great pal of mine."

She remained kneeling but swiveled her body round from her plastic waist. Rather disconcertingly she said nothing and for several seconds turned her blue eyes on to this new man in the manner of a medical officer before whom stood a ma-

lingerer. Then a smile illuminated her face and she held out her hand.

"How are you, Susie?" asked Jedburgh, not with anything of impertinence but with the glad acceptance of proffered friendship.

"Fine. How're you, Teddy? Excuse me while I put the final touches to the landscape."

And all the awkwardness in the situation lifted like a sea fog. The true spirit of camaraderie was here, rare and delightful, in which the eternal sense of sex was absent. Susie Hatch knew that she could, if required, stand in the buff before Bill's pal on the dais of a studio without the flicker of an eyelid. It was instant and instinctive.

"I wish we'd known you were coming, old kid," said Bill. "We'd have taken you out to dinner."

"I wish you had," said Susie. "As it was I nibbled bird seed out of my own pan in the glare of the Evening Sun. Bit of luck I did. Otherwise I should n't have seen that your transport was in. But there are going to be lots of little dinners in the future, Bill, as in the good old days." And she slipped off the fireguard, let her simple vanity case dangle from her wrist and put the soft palm of her hand on Bill's mustache.

"Lots of 'em," said Bill, emphatically, though he added to himself, "But not with me, Susie, my dear. The good old days have died the death. Bill's going to be a good boy now." (Think how the white-haired lady would have preened herself.

at her accurate knowledge of men if she could have heard that sentiment!)

"I must push along," she added, collecting her hat, and using the dangerous pin with callous fingers. "My coat, Teddy, please. It's over there. There's a bite in these April nights."

He fetched it and helped it on. Without a doubt she could put him in the way of the dear sweet thing with a laughing mouth and pacifistic notions. Splendid.

"So long, Bill," she said. "God, how I've been spoiling for this!" And she stood on tiptoe and pressed her face against his heart. "So long, Teddy. I've one or two good pals too." She could easily see the soldier-hunger in his eyes, it seemed. "Let's see, — Jedburgh. Then you're the Lord Edward Tankarville Jedburgh, son of the Duke of Berkshire, who got a bit of a par all to yourself tonight, — Major R. A. F., and a bunch of other letters besides. Eh?"

"I was," said Teddy, "five years ago. All that stuff's a wash-out now."

"I get you," she answered. "Perhaps it's as well. Jedburgh pronounced 'Jedboro', — how often do you have to tell people how to spell it?"

"Every time," said Teddy.

"I love those comic English names that are spelt all wrong." She gave him her hand again. "See you to-morrow."

"Rather. Cheerio."

He watched her as she made her way to the door

escorted by Bill. A good sort, honest and with a golden heart, he thought, and the spiritual courage of a Red Cross Nurse.

"Tell me about her," he said, when Bill came back.

Cigars were lighted and glasses filled before Bill flung himself into the sofa. He was tired but not sleepy. Everything in him tingled at the thought of to-morrow, his people, the old homestead, and peace.

"I put in to one of the New England harbors on the coast of Maine, August, 1913. One or two hotels about for summer visitors, mostly Canadians, — a cheery lot who had achieved things — but I lived aboard the 'Iolanthe'. Engine trouble kept us by the leg for a week. . . . I watched a kid diving like a mermaid from the end of the breakwater, brown as a nut. She swam all round the yacht day after day as a fish circles something new and enticing. Sometimes she would come close up, catch my eye, and dip away, as shy as all water things. One afternoon I called out and asked her on to tea, never dreaming that she would come and not caring. I simply wanted to give her a little amusement. She came, climbed on like a boy, sat in the sun and dried and said yes and no to me while I talked, not knowing what to say. She was a water baby, the child of the four winds, Nature herself. . . . After that she came whenever she could and we yarned and she painted the monotony of her life, — fisherman's daughter, tumbledown

shack, mother worn out by a constantly increasing family, father coming in and going out. Men must work and women must weep and the harbor bar goes moaning. . . . Half a day out, engines right again, steward reports stowaway. Up comes mermaid, in a white frock longer at the back than at the front, bare brown legs, foot to make a sculptor fly to clay, hair bleached by the sun, eyes like robin's eggs and a slice of the sky. . . . Serious talk, a frightful passion of tears, an appeal for love that would have wrung the bloodless heart of a stone saint, — and Bill the human man. Good God, what else than to help her to life? Eventually New York, an apartment, an allowance, and I give you my solemn word the loyalty and devotion of a stray dog. . . . Teddy, that child has done more to make me respect women than anyone on earth. My mother and Susie Hatch sent me to Plattsburg, not patriotism, not a sense of self-respect. I had to put myself between them and the Huns. . . . She is very happy educating herself and taking lessons in drawing and is the pet of a collection of art students — but she belongs to me, has cleaved herself to me, like ivy to a wall. . . . You saw. . . . That's the story."

There was a rather long silence. Teddy sat on the fireguard hugging his knees and looking through the wall and right out into the future. To anyone who could read it there was an appeal in his eyes to be rescued from great loneliness and detachment and the sudden spells of melancholy that crept into

his soul. He would give ten years of his life for such an attachment as the one Bill had drawn in his blunt, impressionist way. To have someone, somewhere, who gave a damn to hear his voice, whose exclusive call he would leap to answer, — that was what he had come out of death to find. It was the only thing to make the escape worth while.

“Well,” he said, at last, just as Bill was beginning to think that he had gone back to one of his stony silent moods, “I need n’t ask what you’re going to do, old son. First the old people for a week or so and then Susie and the ‘Iolanthe’ and the wide stretches of the sea. Is that it?”

Bill shook his head. “No. . . . No. . . . I don’t know quite what’s come over me, whether this show has aged me or made me less careless, or what. All I know is that I’ve come back with the prodigal son’s longing to indulge in an orgy of sentimental reconstruction. Y’ see, I’ve laid the red-paint on pretty thick since I was old enough to know anything about colors and now I’ve got a pathetic eagerness to turn over a new leaf and build a church out of the ruins of my past, so to speak.”

“Marriage and kids, eh?”

“Yes, that’s the notion. . . . A flower of a girl, with the dew on her and a morning hymn in her eyes, — all to myself, to treat right, and play the good old game by, and a young Bill and a tiny Lylyth, the country year in and year out and home. Get me?”

“Why not Susie?”

"Susie? . . . I dunno. But does one marry Susie?"

"Perhaps not. Cursed shame. The inevitable swing of the pendulum has taken you back to the conventions. It always happens."

"Does it? Yes, I suppose it does. What about you?"

"Me? . . . It's not the same thing. The aftermath of this bloody war hits me differently. I had the home idea pretty strong five years ago and was the ordinary British landowning cove who shot his birds, and played his cricket, and rebuilt the cottages of his tenants, was quiet and orderly and even a bit idealistic, — believing in God and the Constitution and myself, as one of the men born to take a hand in the destinies of the British Empire, and all that. You know the type, — title, houses, horses, London, the country, a nice girl of my own traditions, marriage, kids, the House of Lords, duty and a muscular old age, inspiring my son to walk the narrow path, take the jumps, play with a straight bat and carry on as per."

"Well? What's the matter with all that now?"

"All over, old thing. Dead as a skinned rabbit. I'm a Dodo, like the rest of my class. Labor has us by the throat, the land and the money bags. Besides which I've come out of a long game of touch wood with death and obeying orders blindly, many of 'em absolutely crass in their stupidity, with no longer any faith in God, — not a farthing's worth."

"How's that?"

"Well, it's difficult to explain. I believe it's because I resent this war as something so fiendish, so crooked, so purposeless that if there'd been a God he would never have let it happen. I don't say that I didn't enjoy it all after I got used to it. I did. I had the time of my life, — but it swung me into a new way of looking at things and it's left me with faith only in the men who did the dirty work with jokes on their lips, the women who patched them up to do it again and the beardless sky-larking boys who went up in the air and didn't give a curse if they never came down again. My faith is in humanity now, and in humanity as the opposite of God, as a mass of small creatures with a limited time out of which to snatch all the happiness that's going, — to love and play the giddy ox and go on the loose. Why not? As there's no God there's no need to earn a safe seat in Heaven. The narrow path is no thoroughfare and rectitude's a waste of effort. So I begin where you leave off, Bill. That's the way it's hit me, and while you're putting up the stones that are going to make your church, I pull my church down and hide the stones in wild oats. I'm here, in a country that's not so blood-drained and twisted into knots as my own, to take on a Susie Hatch. I give myself extended leave. I'm going to pay myself back for five years of close attention to the job we all had in hand by getting even with my old idea of God. . . . There you have me, as far as I know myself."

There was another silence, during which Bill

looked closely at the tall, spare man who sat nursing his knees on the fireguard, — the man built on the clean, thoroughbred lines of a race horse, with a high and thoughtful forehead, wide apart gray eyes, fair fine hair that went into natural kinks when allowed to do so; a straight nose, a small fair mustache over a mouth that was devoid of sensualism but not of the desire to kiss, and a lean jaw. A distinguished soldier, with the knack of getting men to work against the grain and follow him into feats of unbelievable courage, with a sense of discipline that had sent him back to his command after three separate doses of shrapnel that would have put many others on a cushy billet behind the lines. . . . He knew him for all that. The rest came as a surprise, because during all the monotonous hours of the voyage home the fourth wall had never been let down. . . . Krupp had blown his God out of Heaven, it seemed, and given shell shock to his sense of law and order.

Bill got up and stretched himself and pitched the butt of his cigar into the fireplace. He understood, though in the light of his own point of view he was sorry. It was not for him, of all men, to moralize.

“Well, good luck, Teddy,” he said.

“The same to you, Bill,” said Teddy.

And they turned in for the night, to follow their diametrical paths when the new day came.

III

THE message that Bill had sent over the wire to his mother, asking her not to meet him in the City but to let him find her among her flowers in the old garden with his father, was received the evening before the transport put into the river and edged its cheering way through a misty day to dock as the sun went down. Martha was with her at the time, with a hammering heart, inarticulate under great waves of emotion, in which gratitude to God for prayers so fully answered clashed with the impending joy of seeing her hero again.

Both the Mortimers were relieved in being spared the effort of a long and early drive to a City full of Dead Sea fruit, and they were equally touched by Bill's desire for a reunion under the roof of the old house in which he had been born and to which they themselves had retired. It proved to them, too, as nothing else could have done, the accuracy of their contention that the reaction from war would find Bill in a domestic mood. If he had asked them to come up to meet him, had dined with them, sent them home and plunged into the current of his old life with his old friends, their pet scheme, in which Martha Wainwright was to play the leading part, must have crumbled like paper at the touch of a lighted match.

Mrs. Mortimer had read the telegram aloud to the eager slip of a girl and had watched the flame in her eyes and the rush of color to her cheeks with her

usual imperturbability but an excitement very difficult to conceal. She would go happily to whatever was waiting for her on the other side if she could leave Bill married and settled down with this most suitable girl.

The whole of the next day was a series of broken precedents. Routine was shattered. The studied equability and smoothness of meals was replaced by an electrical snappiness and even irritability. The Old Buck was on the tips of his toes. He could hardly bear to sit down even for five consecutive minutes. To the extreme annoyance of the housekeeper and Albery he insisted upon superintending personally every detail in the preparation of Bill's suite of rooms. He trotted about the house to make sure that everything was in the pink of order, he inspected the garden with the anxiety of a Colonel anticipating the visit of a Brigadier General, snapping absurd orders to gardeners which left them in a condition of mental chaos, and by his repeated interference reduced the head coachman to the verge of blasphemy. Even the faithful Denham, with whom he was, as a rule, on terms of intimate friendship, fled at the sound of his parade rasp, and assured the kitchen that if "he had much more of this he'd either kill the old devil by giving him a dose of hair dye or go back to England by the next boat and buy that there pub in his native village." Finally, very tired and irascible, he retired early in order to undergo an extra dose of face massage and electrical treatment and heard the conscientious

clock on his mantelpiece strike every hour until five, when he fell into the sleep of a schoolboy on the verge of his first summer camp or a young girl before her initial dip into the world. If anyone had told him that even the return of his beloved Bill would so far have flung him out of balance he would have sent out a scoffing laugh and told him that "nothing upsets me, my dear fellow. I am the original egotist."

The white-haired lady was moved to precisely the same degree but to more useful results. With a song on her lips and a mother-smile on her again beautiful face she quietly and surreptitiously followed the Commodore from upset to upset, spreading oil on troubled waters and placating a distraught ménage with soothing and serviceable words. She got Martha to pick a bunch of early spring flowers and spent an hour of the most exquisite happiness arranging them on the massive pieces of colonial furniture in Bill's bedroom and the low-ceilinged sitting room which connected with it. And all the while her mind was flooded with memories of a little boy and his needs and stories and precious possessions, and the odd sweet things that he used to say in those far distant hours when he would sit on the floor with Robinson Crusoe and keep up a constant prattle while her hair was being done for dinner. Once more she felt the fresh healthy cheek pressed against her breast and the strong young arms about her neck. "Oh God," she cried out aloud, as she stood looking with wet eyes at a little photograph

of herself with the chubby Bill on her lap, "if only my dreams had come true and I had been permitted by Fate to marry where my heart was. Bill would have been a different man to come back to me!" And it was at that moment that the second twinge of conscience attacked her as the vision of Martha Wainwright stood momentarily before her, slim and virginal and trusting. But once again, because Bill was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, she dismissed pity from her mind. For all his frailties, Bill was a man that any woman should be proud to possess.

But it was Martha who caught the first sight of Bill.

Standing among the same belt of trees on the hillock at the bend of the road from which she had watched him drive away, she waited hour after hour until, at last, she was rewarded by the flash of his profile as a car flicked past. He saw the young figure against the appropriate background of silver birches, recognized in her the pretty child whom he remembered having seen in the garden with his mother, and brought his hand up to the peak of his cap. She waved back—and he took away with him the memory of a smile which rang a little bell in his soul. What was her name? Bainbridge—Waterhouse—Goodfellow? Something like that, —something which carried with it a sense of integrity and honest effort, of a building planted on solid foundations by people of sound constitution and God-fearing spirit. Although he had never

given her a thought, it came back to him that he had seen her standing on that same small mount among the rocks and trees when he had been driven the other way to probable death and he was glad, in that throe of sentiment, to see her there again. It gave him a feeling of returning to find things unaltered, untouched, of having been overlooked by the devil's eye and left undesecrated by the ingenious weapons of destruction.

He little knew with what an exquisite pang of joy Martha cried out to herself "He remembers! He remembers!" or how she took back to her duties at home a love which burgeoned in her heart.

IV

THE Old Rip, deaf to all suggestions, unamenable to any change in his definite program, and as peppery as an Anglo-Indian Colonel before an inspection by the Commander-in-Chief, arranged the household on the steps of the portico a good twenty minutes before Bill's car was timed, bar accidents, to arrive. Made up as the country gentleman in one of those stunted top hats of brown felt which, according to "Punch", are worn by squires at prize cattle shows, a pepper-and-salt coat with large flap pockets, and riding breeches with doeskin gaiters, he took his place on the bottom step with the white-haired lady. He had finally arrived at this costume after several complete changes, and his nerves were almost as frazzled as those of Denham, who had brought the indecision as to appropriate garments

to an abrupt and icy ending by flinging up his hands and crying out, "I hope the Lord will send a bloomin' angel after me before I dribble into this 'ere kind of second childhood!"

In the order of what he chose to consider their importance the Commodore had, after much bickering and many stamps of the foot, arranged his staff, as he suddenly took it into his head to call it, on the upper steps. By insisting on placing Mrs. Porter, the shapeless housekeeper, in front of Alberty, he had given mortal offense to the pompous butler and rendered poor little Mrs. Porter tremulously fearful of her future. She was beyond the time when she could stand without hysterics the biting sarcasm of that gobbling turkey, as she had mentally labelled Alberty. Another crassly injudicious act had been performed by Barclay Mortimer, the after-effects of which would make bad blood in the servants' dining room for a considerable time, by his ordering Denham to stand below Tasker, the head coachman, who had been with the family man and boy for fifty years. "The derved valet, by gosh," was fully alive to the fact that he had been forced into an invidious position against his better judgment, and being already in a state of absolute disruption, after several unholy hours with the Old Buck, could hardly listen to the long string of murmured insults from the irate old man behind him without blowing up. As to Mrs. Fossdick, the cook, one glance at her crab-apple face was enough to indicate the gross indignity which had

been put upon her. Just because Ada, the comparatively new waitress, possessed the come-hither in her bold brown eyes, wore skirts which showed a little more than the flutter of neat ankles and had russet hair in which there were streaks of copper, the master had told her to stand in front of the elderly dame who had been the queen of the kitchen for so many years. It was enough to make a body prance out of the house without giving notice and leave the ungrateful family to the tender mercies of a slap-dash Irish woman who only knew how to cook for a priest, that it was. The remainder of the ménage, consisting of the gardeners, maids and stable-hands, stood under the portico in any order they chose, but the amazing blunders in servant precedence thus willfully committed had left them stultified and surly. There were more than ample grounds in all this for the Trades Union of Condescending Helpers of the Household to order an immediate strike.

From time to time, during the period of waiting, the Old Rip wheeled around and glared at the dissatisfied group of muttering people behind him and brought about a temporary stoniness by shouting, with his best parade rasp, "Let there be silence, please." And all the while, completely indifferent to the clash of temperament that was all about her, the white-haired lady waited, with a little smile playing round her mouth, to feel, once again, the strong arms of her only son.

Old Glory floated above the house in Bill's honor,

side by side with the banners of the Allies, and a dozen Boy Scouts of all sizes were drawn up on the lawn to cheer themselves hoarse. It was a terrible but well-earned ordeal through which Bill was to be forced to go.

As the car came through the old gates and bowled along the wide road, the boughs of trees under whose protecting shade the spirits of departed Mortimers seemed to hover, bent to welcome the one to whom they looked to perpetuate the name, and the air rang with the thin cries of the lads on the lawn.

Bill gave one quick nervous glance at all this ghastly fuss for which, knowing his father, he was partially prepared, thanked all his stars that he had been spared the village band, sprang out from among his baggage, caught his mother in his arms and held her tight. Then he turned to Barclay Mortimer, whose over-massaged face was twisted with emotion, flung an arm round his shoulder and kissed him as he had always done when, as a boy, he had joined him for the holidays. The old man tried to utter the opening sentences of a well-prepared speech, stammered, stumbled, and burst into tears. In all his reprobate life never before had he felt so genuine an acknowledgment of God's goodness as at that moment. The boy loved him and he gave great praise.

And then, facing the old house which had never amounted to a row of beans before but which, in his new mood, stood for home and a wife, a young Bill and a tiny Lylyth, Bill's face broke into its

usual sunny grin, and he mounted the steps, with his arm round his mother's waist, grasped one after another of the eager hands that were stretched out to him, indignities forgotten for the time being, achieved the hall and finally the drawing-room and stood alone once more with the white-haired lady whose peccadillos he knew and condoned, whose former beauty and invincibility he had admired and marveled at, and whose deep love and services he could never, never forget.

"Mum," he said, "my own darling Mum."

And they stood and whispered broken words to each other, under the eyes of dead Mortimers, while the Commodore, himself again, doled out dollar bills to the uneven Boy Scouts, the beaming and benign Squire to the life.

And in the house of honest effort away behind the trees, Martha Wainwright, marked out to be "brought forward" as the mother of a new generation of Mortimers, wrote out her list of groceries with little pearls of joy dropping on the slip.

And so wags the world.

V

"You have had the extreme privilege of leading your mother to her after-dinner resting place, my dear fellow," said the Commodore, "but I'll be damned if I'll forego my right to arrange her cushions."

With that low soft laugh of hers which, in the old days, had more than once made Barclay Mortimer

mer too keenly aware of the fact that he stood before her stripped of his poses, the white-haired lady turned from her son to her husband. "How nice to be fought over by two such handsome men," she said.

Whereupon Bill gave her up and backed away laughing. It was an utterly new thing for him to see his father and mother permanently under the same roof and behaving like elderly lovers in a Sheridan play. It gave him great amusement as well as, he had to confess, an odd sensation of pain.

In return for her flattery Mortimer bowed profoundly, — as profoundly, that is, as his stays would permit, — raised her hand to his lips, and, with more than his usual mixture of courtesy and respect, piled cushions at the head of the Colonial sofa. He was in the highest spirits and so frankly happy in this reunion that he radiated good humor. His hair had been waved for the occasion and his mustache curled back with a hot iron. The ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur made a red spot on the lapel of his tight fitting dinner jacket.

Mrs. Mortimer allowed herself to be placed upon the sofa and smiled up at Bill over the shoulders of the Old Rip as he bent to arrange her skirt about her feet. This was one of the good moments to which she had been looking forward during every one of the long hours of two desperately anxious years, and her heart seemed still to float in tears.

"Sit near me, Bill," she said.

"We will both sit near you, Madame. I decline

to be made to agonize under the pangs of jealousy by this intruder to our Paradise." And the old man guffawed at the joke none could appreciate so fully as those who knew him so well. They were his best audience.

"I'll just dash up and get my pipe," said Bill. "I can't smoke anything else."

And the instant that he left the morning room and went whistling to the stairs a change came over the father and mother. Dropping their artificial spirit of comedy and badinage they drew instinctively together, alone for the first time since the return of the one person on earth who united them in unselfishness.

"Lylyth, you were right. He's not the same man," said Mortimer, eagerly.

"Sssh!—lower your voice. . . . Yes, he's altered. A hundred little things that he has said make it plain. His very look proves it. But don't let him guess that we've been planning for his future or making a scheme to lead him into marriage. Promise me that."

"You have my word, my dear. Men hate to be discussed and coerced. We must let him appear to work out his own salvation while we pull the strings unseen. Already I can hear the creaking of a cradle."

"Yes, but I have one great fear, Barclay."

"Good God, what?"

"That girl, Hatch. He has come back full of generosity and sentiment. It is n't at all impossible

that he may want to do what you men in his mood have often done before and make her a good woman, as it 's called."

Mortimer stood aghast. "An appalling thought," he said. "What on earth has put it into your head?"

"A knowledge of your sex. History reeks with instances. Therefore we must go warily. If he has built a romance round Susan Hatch we must undermine it not by arguments but by apparent agreement and the production at the right moment and in the right manner of the girl who has always been good. He comes to us inspired to regeneration. Only by virtue can this be achieved,—and if this is not in his mind we must put it there. . . . How . . . how good to have him home again!"

The Commodore, forgetting that he had learned the gesture from his Italian inamorata in the Villa Fiora, raised his hands to Heaven. "Whatever else I omitted to give him," he said, "I was lavish in the gift of looks. . . . We might easily be taken for brothers, don't you think, Madame?" And although he chuckled away the edge of this conceit he squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest and gave a fluke to his absurd mustache. Then, with a sudden return to seriousness and in a voice quivering with a kind of pathetic eagerness he added, "I leave the matter of Bill's marriage entirely in your hands, Lylyth. For God's sake see that I have the joy and satisfaction of riding a grandson on my knee before I answer to the summons."

"It is the last object of my life," replied Mrs. Mortimer. "I will leave no stone unturned, no trick untried, no diplomacy unexercised to achieve it. Rely upon me. . . . Talk about something else, quickly. He is on the stairs."

The Old Buck rose to the occasion. "It was King Edward who sent for me to his box in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot that year," he said loudly, as though in the middle of one of his anecdotes, "and in that inimitable way of his congratulated me on the Ah, here you are, my boy. I wish I could join you in a pipe. I have never managed to achieve the habit." He gave a side glance at his wife to catch her look of appreciation and lowered himself carefully into an arm-chair. An artist in worldliness he was, and so remained, he thanked his stars.

Bill beamed first at one and then at the other, and so that there might be no jealousy at his favoritism of either took up a stand in front of the old fireplace, with his back against the mantel-board. God, how often, out there in that waterlogged funk-hole, he had longed for this moment, and wrapped his parents and his home about with a veil of idealism! . . . A simple soul, this Bill Mortimer, loving happiness and ease and the game of life; without an ounce of guile, perfectly ready to pay and pay generously for whatever gave him pleasure; a heart instantly moved to sympathy and kindness towards women and men and beasts, susceptible to beauty to a degree even beyond that which had car-

ried his father into similar feminine embarrassments, and so good-natured that it was as easy to lead him by the nose as any school-boy. Deep down in his soul, too, there was a sense of poetry and a definite ache for permanency which, awakened by all that he had seen of death and destruction, made him almost as pathetic a figure as the two old people who had been forced to slip into the backwaters and who had utterly lost the chance that remained to him, if he knew how to take it, of twisting his rudder into mid-stream and turning his pleasure craft into a cargo boat.

"I love this room," he said, running his dark eyes over the things among which he had grown up. "And how corking all the old stuff looks. I hope I have the luck to bring home the sort of girl who won't call it junk and want to pitch it neck and crop into the garden."

The Old Rip and the white-haired lady exchanged a quick signal. Away went their anxiety as to the Hatch person. He had built up a picture of an unknown girl.

"Bill! . . . Surely *you* are not thinking of being conventional at your age?" Mrs. Mortimer asked the question with the most perfect simulation of lightness, — to hang on his answer with held breath. Little he knew how splendidly he helped the great plan by touching so soon upon the subject of it.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am," he said simply.

"My dear fellow," cried the Old Rip, "if you

flung a bomb in our midst you could n't surprise us as much." He was a master in the art of picking up cues.

"I suppose not," said Bill, watching his smoke filter into the air. He made a fine figure in his uniform, in spite of its high collar and lack of belt. "But I may as well be frank with you right away and get it over. Bill's going to be a good boy now and play the little old game of domesticity. That's the truth. So find me a wife, Mother, and I'll show you how serious I am."

It was almost too good to be true, well and shrewdly as she had banked on this change of mood. "My dear Bill," she said, controlling the ecstatic Commodore by raising one long finger, "is n't that rather a large order? Who do I know now that I am out of the world? Besides, there are complications in the shapes of Susie Hatch, Birdie Carroll, Jeanne Dacoral and the rest."

"A washout," he said. "Bill's plumping for respectability these days. He's all for being the little gentleman now." It was an amusing habit of his to refer to himself in the third person as he had done as a youngster.

The two great sighs of relief of the disrespectable parents joined forces in mid-air and went paradoxically to the gates of Heaven.

"It's like this, my dears," he went on before they could play-act again. "One had a certain amount of time for thinking out there, and pretty straight thoughts at that. I saw myself with a bit

of a shock with the best half of my life behind me and nothing but a record of darned good times to show for it. And at the end of it all, and during those days after the armistice when a sort of let-down feeling crept over us all, and playing the victor business began to pall like the devil, I put to myself this question. What in fairness are you going to do, Bill, old son, to show your gratitude for having been let off? And the answer was obvious. Go home, and if luck's still with you hunt about for the sort of dear sweet soul who will fit the bill according to mother and you, Dad, and the old gentlemen who have frowned down at me from these walls ever since I was a nipper. And so I've come home with nothing in my mind except this new job, —the peace job, and now that I'm here and the whole atmosphere seems to egg me on to it I want you to help me, because I'm a boob at the business and 'pon my soul I hardly know how to begin to say things to Miss Respectable. Wait a second. Let me get the rest of it off my chest before I get self-conscious and do the clam act. You mentioned Susan Hatch and the rest, Mother, and I said that they're a washout. That's so. They belong to the good old days. But, —and this is what sticks in my gills, — is there a Miss Respectable knocking about who will take me on when I play honest and tell her the Story, however Bowdlerized? And that's what I shall be expected to do, I take it?"

He came to an end and looked from one eager listener to the other with a very apparent desire to

be encouraged in the matter of his leaf-turning and discouraged on the question of his scrupulousness.

At once he got what he wanted on both counts.

Barclay Mortimer struggled dramatically to his feet and put his hand on his son's shoulder with spontaneous affection. "God bless you, Bill," he said. "It was only necessary for you to tell us this to make to-day the happiest of my life."

The white-haired lady rose too, and slipped one long-fingered hand through her son's arm. "I echo that, thankfully, my dear, and of course I will help you, — though at the moment my mind is a blank, and as to the need for you to worry about certain chapters in the book as you have written it there is none. Let the dead past bury its dead. More harm than good is done by taking a young thing with her eyes on the future for a gloomy visit to the catacombs. Besides, this is the twentieth century, and the modern girl does not demand perfection. Egotistical confessions of youthful follies made to Innocence in discreetly lighted conservatories went out with the stuffed canary and the draped Venus. It would be received to-day with a peal of laughter and an outburst of chaff."

"Oh," said Bill. "Well, that's the best thing I've heard for a long time. It puts my tail up no end." And he whistled the first few bars of an old regimental song as much to show his relief as to bring the blood pressure of the room back to normal. He had never seen his father so parental before. He realized with deep regret that age had got

hold of him, in spite of his bitter fight. Nor had he ever seen his mother so confident, so electrical, and so supremely a mistress of life. He was glad that he had pulled down his fourth wall at once and let them see into the sanctum of his heart.

"Mind you," he added suddenly, "don't run away with the idea that I've got to fall passionately in love and that sort of thing, and am going to be difficult to please. I've been through that phase, I'm sorry to say, — sorry because I can't look forward to it as something not yet done, if you know what I mean. I shall be so grateful to the right little soul who will do me the honor to become my wife that, although there will be no first lover stuff about me, there will be a frightfully keen desire to make her happy in every other conceivable way. Having turned over a new leaf I'll see that I do my derndest to make it a good 'un. I want you to get that. In other words, I'm so bursting keen to settle down at last and play the game for all I'm worth that it's — it's pathetic."

He was glad of the excuse to cross the room for a match. In his jerky colloquial way he had let himself go and there was something suspiciously like a quiver in his voice.

And so the first evening of Bill's home coming was brought to an end with everybody's cards on the table, except the one on which Martha Wainwright's flower-like face was painted. And this the white-haired lady held up her sleeve for future use, in what she conceived to be the right way.

Barclay Mortimer, seeing his chance to improve the occasion with a few well-rounded platitudes of the kind that he had written to his son in his famous series of letters, — Emerson, Ruskin and de la Rochefoucauld had been his inspirers, — would have taken the stage had he not received a quick signal from his wife. With an unselfishness that was so new as to be startling he took the hint, saved his remarks for a more propitious occasion and let well enough alone. It was a gigantic triumph of matter over mind. Instead, being on his feet, he pom-pomed about the room so that Bill might admire his slimness. Things looked good and he was as proud of his wife's perspicacity as he was of his power to back her up. He was, also, eternally grateful to the war for its putting him in the way of becoming a grandfather, — the one remaining ambition of his life.

"Well," he said finally, "bed's a good place, I think, eh Madame?"

"I think so too," replied Mrs. Mortimer.

"I'll go out and walk up and down," said Bill, "if it's all the same to you. I want to taste the old scent of the garden and make certain that this is not one of my dreams. Good night, Mum darling. You'll work things right. You always did. Good night, Dad, old man. Take me on to-morrow for a round of golf and beat me."

Golf! He had n't touched a club for five years, and he could n't do much more than touch one now, trussed up in those stays of his. But the sugges-

tion that he was still a hefty fellow, by Gad, pleased him beyond words and he threw himself into a Braid attitude before an imaginary ball and laughed. "Eleven o'clock on the first tee," he said, "with all the pleasure in life." It would be easy to tell Denham to come after him and fetch him back on a matter of the most urgent importance. Anyway, that wonderful suit of golf clothes would get an airing.

The white-haired lady kept a perfectly straight face.

"Oh, by the way," said Bill, "what's the name of that charming little girl who used to come and see you before we went into the old push?"

It was a question that caused the old people almost to jump out of their skins. Surely there must be something occult in all this.

"Do you mean Martha Wainwright?" asked Mrs. Mortimer, hiding the gleam in her eyes by bending over the sofa.

"That's it," said Bill. "Martha — suggestive of pansies and sweet-williams, and Wainwright of an anvil, hit hard and well. By Jove yes. That's it."

"Why do you ask?" Old Mortimer touched the cheeks of a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley to show that he was only faintly and politely interested.

"I saw her standing on the hill at the bend of the road after I'd said good-by, and she was there again to-day when I drove up. The last and the first. Somehow she made me feel that I'd come

back to find nothing changed here. I liked it awfully. Does she still come over sometimes?"

"Every afternoon," said Mrs. Mortimer.

"Oh, good."

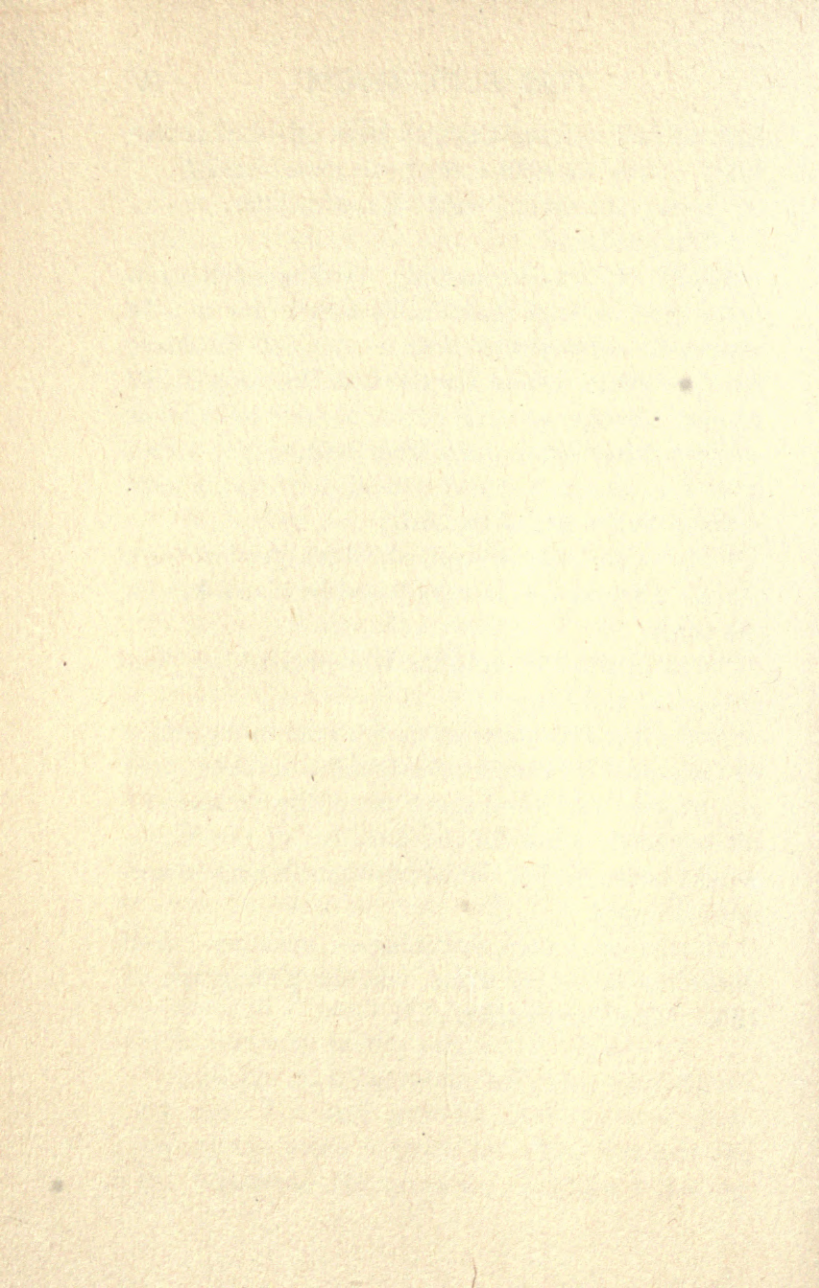
Good? It was astounding, thrilling, full of a predestination that made Bill's search for a wife almost an accomplished fact. . . . Good Heavens, what an effort it was for the Old Rip to hold his tongue. Sooner or later, before he went to bed that epoch-making night, something had to go, — and it went as soon as he stood with his wife on the wide corridor at the top of the stairs.

"My love," he whispered, "the fairies were abroad when you were born," and he kissed her on the cheek.

"Bad fairies," thought the white-haired lady, but she smiled and bowed.

And when Bill, standing on the road in the magic of the moon, breathed in the familiar scent of pines and maples and looked about him at the old scene of his boyhood, it was in the direction of the Wainwright house behind the woods that his eyes turned unconsciously.

Martha was asleep, dreaming — dreaming. And under her pillow, as usual, was the photograph of Bill. Miss Respectable. . . .



PART III

I

IMBUED with a sense of comfort that was far too good to be true, Tom Wainwright opened one eye slowly, cautiously and with great suspicion. Catching sight of a large airy bedroom hung with photographs of himself taken in every Harvard attitude and filled with solid pieces of furniture that appeared to him to give it an atmosphere of almost painful luxury, he immediately shut it. . . . It was a dream, the old familiar frequently recurring dream out of which he had come daily, at unearthly earliness, for nearly two years, to find himself in the rough quarters of a camp, the unspeakable filth of a dugout or rolled in a sleeping bag out under the stars. That idiot phrase "the glory of the trenches" which had made so many men blaspheme came back ironically into his mind.

He opened the other eye and recognized his bedroom, his own old bedroom of pre-war days, alive with memories of school and college and all the things of peace that had been knocked edgeways by the hideous cataclysm which had sent the whole

world reeling and staggering and left, it is to be hoped, a mark on every individual member of European governments by which they may be identified for Hell. "Theirs the blame, and theirs the shame and theirs the ultimate tears."

Was he home again? Could this be that honest-to-goodness house in which he had lived through years of unbelievable comfort? . . . From Camp Upton and all its chaos and cloying sand to a troopship packed like a grotesque box of sardines; from troopship to debarkation at the back-end of muddle; from mud, rain, growling and little flares of mutiny; forced marches, bedraggled train journeys to rear lines marked with the remainders of previous regiments; front line funk-holes, monotonous vistas of pock-marked earth and battered barbed-wire poles, blind rushes through the shambles of death to ruined villages; finally the utter boredom of German billets to — what? It had been a long, long way to Tipperary, — the Tipperary which was that very house, that very room with the mementos of the best of his days, and downstairs his people. . . .

Fully awake, but spiritually afraid to open both eyes at once in case he might find that his furtive glances had shown him something not yet achieved, Tom Wainwright lay very still. His hands were flat out on the sheets. "Now then," he said to himself, "get on to it. Pull yourself together. What happened yesterday?" He set the machinery of his brain at work and in a series of moving, strangely moving, pictures saw himself undergo the

emotional welcome of father and mother and sister, the return home to a wonderful dinner with grinning servants coming in and out of a well-known room, and an evening during which he answered a fire of questions and thrilled, as any boy would, at the hero-worship that was given to him. And as he got these things and fixed them one after another, and caught the sounds of birds singing outside his window, of the breeze making its friendly rustle in the trees that he had climbed, and of a grass-cutting machine somewhere near giving out that steady whir, which, like nothing else, seems peculiarly to belong to peace, confidence came and funk left. It was all true. This *was* Tipperary. . . . And as he sat up, tousle-headed, and looked about him with affection, he saw a man in a dressing-gown shaving in front of a looking glass, a tall, square-shouldered man with his grey hair unbrushed and something about the back of his neck that belongs only to those who have kept their chins high in the struggle to live.

"Damned nice of the old man to come in and shave and not wake me up," he thought, and catching his father's eyes in the glass gave him the sort of salute that he reserved especially for Brigadier Generals.

"Hello, Dad."

"Hello, Tom."

And they grinned at each other from opposite ends of the room, saying in the eloquent silence of father and son all the affectionate things which

both had been hoarding up for two years and could no more put into words than fly over the moon.

It was Tom who was the first to master his voice. Thank God he had had the luck to do one or two things of which that good old Dad would not be ashamed. "Got to go up this morning?" he asked, casually.

But Wainwright beat him. No one could have told by his tone that this was not the most ordinary of mornings. "Yes, but I'm coming down on the 1:52. If you've nothing better to do, we might put in a round before dinner."

"There is n't anything on earth better to do," said Tom, leaping out of bed. He found it necessary to make a dash for the window to hide the sudden twist of his mouth.

And old Wainwright, who was n't old, smiled. It was a thing like that which made his laborious days worth while. "A good glass, yours," he said. "I often came in here to shave when you were on the other side."

"Fine," said Tom, who never by any chance used it for such a purpose. He could only see one side of his face in it. But the enormous compliment which had been paid to him by its use went all the way home. "I don't think I'll come up with you this morning, unless you want me. I think I'll slack for a bit and be domestic for a change. Mother and Martha might like it, don't you think so?"

"Good Lord, yes. I don't want to see you near

the office until you've found your feet, old man. Play around as long as you feel like it." But the subtle hint which his son had given him of a desire to put his shoulder to the civil wheel again was worth a million dollars.

He had seen and heard of men, innumerable men, upon whom the effects of war had reacted very differently. Some of them returned to their old haunts with what appeared to be an utter incapacity to adjust themselves to pre-war conditions. They shied at the thought of sedentary work and regularity. They had patience for nothing unless there was a girl in it. If also there was music so much the better. But the former there must be, pretty or not pretty. Others brought back with them such a sense of tragic rage and disillusion at the unutterable futility and waste of their patriotism and efforts, both physical and spiritual, that they went about under a continual mental shell-shock, out of which they emerged infrequently to curse the glib and ignorant politicians who had already forgotten the war and its causes and left the incapacitated men to the charity of the public. Dangerous men these, imbued with the sort of thoughts that are parochially placed under the heading of Bolshevism. Men who did not intend, without a grim and bitter struggle, to permit their country to indulge in the old tyrannies of government without the consent of peoples, the old Fetish worship of hatred masking under the divine name of Patriotism. There was that other set, too, who, not intellectual enough to

look back at the causes and forward at the results of the war with anything but a sense of bewilderment, sneered at all talk of readjustment, went about saying, "Hell, we paid, who's going to pay us?" and scoffed at the suggestion that they must return, if anyone would take them, to their old dull jobs. They demanded the fat of the land. They had earned it. They stood about with an expectant and rather ugly grin waiting to be spoiled. There were very few whose normality had not been jerked out of balance or who, like young Tom Wainwright, were ready to resume old ways with the same eager boyishness as before. How should there be? No wonder, therefore, that this father left for his business with thankfulness in his heart and a joyful surprise.

II

THERE were several eye-openers in store for "my boy Tom" that morning, and all of them gave him a very new and wonderful insight into the ways and hearts of parents, jerking him into a realization of the fact, very vaguely appreciated up to the time of his getting into uniform, that a son, when his people happen to be the Wainwrights of the earth, occupies the star position in the house.

He had left his civies in a condition of wild chaos and thus he expected, unimaginatively enough, to find them. Instead of which he discovered them, with a sort of shock, in the most perfect order. His socks and golf stockings had not only

been mended but rolled up separately and arranged in platoons in his drawers. His suits, brushed and ironed, hung primly in the closet, winter to the right, summer to the left. Shoes, treed and glistening, pointed their toes at him from a shelf. His modest collection of ties hung decoratively all across a bar. In fact, all his possessions, even his pipes, told the tale of tender attention and gave him a picture of his mother working over his things again and again in order to get something from them and to give something to him which is necessary to the maternal instinct. A queer moment for this hitherto scatter-brained lad, who had given and taken lightly and never stopped to look for anything that was n't on the surface. He chuckled at all this astounding neatness and wondered how long it would be before the old chaos reigned again, but, able now to understand the meaning behind it, he metaphorically took off all his hats to his mother in absolute unsheepish gratitude. "Gee whiz," he said, "some Mother, and Martha's in on this too. I'll have to do something for them both." And when finally he surveyed himself in pre-war clothes, having chucked his uniform into the farthest corner of a man-sized closet, the one ambition that loomed up at the back of his mind was to prove to the women of his family his deep sense of appreciation. All the fun to which he had looked forward like a school-boy on a holiday should be shared with these two who, during his absence, had shown their devotion in the Madonna-like manner of women.

Whatever the war had succeeded in developing in other men who had escaped, it had awakened in the cheery Tom something which would make him both happy and miserable in his future life, — imagination. It had dug under that casual acceptance of things which belongs to youth and brought out the sensitive faculty of looking over the wall and putting himself in other people's shoes. And this meant the end of his old detached manner of taking life and the supreme individualism and gross selfishness which is the prerogative of all young people. His two years of service added to his conscious nearness to death had raised a curtain that would never be lowered again. He had put his feet over the boundary line between undergraduatism and manhood and was thus able to get from all his things that were so neatly arranged the essence of those prayers that came to him like scent. . . .

He drove his father to the station and stood about with him, close, talking golf and banking in jerks, away back on the platform. He could go through the "Well-well" stuff with the nobs of the neighborhood some other time. He was like a young brother; he tried to be. But the grip that he gave to the banker's hand and the glint that was in his eye when he said "I'll meet you. Don't forget our match now," sent the old man up to the City with a warm feeling about the heart which nothing else could have achieved. Driving the car as though it were an aeroplane he went back to the house to show his mother what he thought about

her. To anyone who had made a close study of youth in all its honesty and naïve conceit it would have provided a vast amount of amusement to watch this boy in sudden realization of his potency, to see him under the new emotion of responsibility, the state of being answerable to his people for the proper and immediate discharge of expressed devotion which would clinch their happiness. It had been growing and taking shape ever since he got up. It put his chin high and puffed out his chest. It made him feel years older. It put the badge of high rank on his shoulders. All the same it came up against a huge diffidence and a worrying eagerness to do it all without letting it be seen that he was conscious of the duty part of it. He didn't knock on the door of her bedroom in the grown-up way. He deliberately banged up against it and shouted "Mum" as he had been in the habit of doing in the old days before dashing off to school.

He won the old answer. He was betting on it. "Oh Tom dear, do be careful," — and went in laughing.

Mrs. Wainwright had breakfasted in her room, after a night distressed by bouts of bronchial coughing. She had the inevitable appearance of the invalid, and the manner of the ill person who has become unable to look at anything without turning it to herself. Her symptoms were the all absorbing facts. Her face was pale and her eyes tired and little blue veins marked her temples. But she had expected this visit and so had arranged herself on

the sofa at the foot of the bed in a new and becoming dressing gown. Her hair had been as carefully brushed and done up as though she were going to a dinner party. She wore several of her best rings. The room had been tidied and put in order under Martha's energetic direction and the various vases had been filled with newly-cut flowers. There was something in this touch of maternal vanity and the desire to rise above invalidism and "receive" with consideration that made Tom feel that the days of his rowdy boyhood were a very long way behind them both.

"Rotten bad luck," he said to himself with a feeling of almost feminine sympathy and went forward not as "Tom-dear-do-be-careful" as he had wanted to do, but as Tom the Man who had to be treated as such. "How are you, mother," he said, and knocked out his pipe on the creeper that grew up to the window sill. Always before he had smoked in that room as in every other and filled it with clouds of tobacco in the usual boy manner.

"Oh, don't do that," she said. "You can smoke here if you like."

And this gave him his first chance. He went over to her and kissed her. "Not now. I've learnt a few things since I went away," and had the infinite satisfaction of seeing that his point went home.

After that, talking hard, about her things and not his own, he remained for a solid hour, although the

sun called him and he was consumed with a desire to get round to the garage and tinker on his car. He did n't walk about the room either, taking things up and putting them down again, being there merely as a matter of duty. He sat tight in the same chair as though a willing fixture and to every one of her appeals not to waste his time paid no attention. It was a masterly piece of work, performed with the most sympathetic artfulness and without the smallest possible degree of filial condescension. His mother should see unmistakably that he liked to be with her, that he chose to be with her, that he insisted on being with her, that he would, in fact, rather be with her than with any other person under the sun. And she got it as he hoped that she would, and together they made that hour one of the triumphs of her life, — those rare, beautiful, maternal triumphs which so few mothers ever enjoy until their children have got children of their own and thus are able to appreciate the fine points of parenthood and to understand how deeply the small and apparently trivial things in the relations between child and parent count in the scheme of life.

And not once during the whole of those sixty minutes did Tom permit himself to talk war or his part in it. He talked father, Martha, the black cat, the local gossip, servant stuff and home generally. He touched also on the future and the fact that he was going to knuckle down to work as soon as he had had a bit of a holiday. And then he got up

and apologized for staying so long and said: "Cheerio, Mother. The house won't be the same until you come down and show me what you've done in the garden." But he reserved his big point for the moment when he turned with his hand on the door. "I've never seen anything like the way you've made my clothes look, Mum. What can I do to spoil *you* for a change?"

He left behind him a quiver of electrical emotion which made his little mother clasp her hands together and put up her face and say to herself, "I have a good boy, a very good boy."

III

BEFORE going to the garage Tom decided to hunt up Martha, and, if he could work it in somehow with any luck, to say something to his kid sister which would give her also an inkling of the present state of his feelings. It was a far more difficult job than the one that he had just performed. It was easier to say things to a mother than to a sister any day. What he would have given a great deal to be able to do was quite out of the question. There was something about Martha now which made it impossible to march up to her, kiss her soundly and put in words any of those things that were in his mind, — bang out. Then too, the last two years had taken the kid part away from her. She had acquired that touch of dignity which made him hesitate to prove his affection in the old way by chucking something at her, yanking her hair, chasing her

about the house and pinning her up against a wall until she cried Pax and looked humble. Absence and Anno Domini had made some new way necessary, — he did n't quite know what.

He heard her telephoning in his father's den. With a perfectly natural self-consciousness he drew up short at the door and took several turns along the hall and back trying to get up a few sentences of most affectionate gratitude in which sloppiness should be totally absent. The things that came into his mind were too stilted to consider. He washed them out as idiotic. They would only make her laugh at him. Better be sloppy than pedantic. The sort of thing that was permissible between a brother and sister of her age and his must be suggested rather than put into so many blunt words, he felt. They were n't Latins, able to emote without effort and revel in it. Their Anglo-Saxon blood and tradition boxed them in. He knew jolly well that she loved him, — there had been hero-worship in her eyes the night of his return. And he knew that she knew he loved her because when she had flung her arms round his neck at the first sight of him he had held her frightfully tight and choked a little. At the same time all the rules of the game demanded some sort of spoken recognition of her loyalty to his mother and to himself and of the long drawn out anxiety which she had confessed to in her letters. . . . Great Scot, how *was* he to get it off his chest?

He was inclined to continue on his way to the

garage and the self-indulgence of pottering at his engine. Mañana. But the discipline which had been ground into him during the last two years brought him back to the door. "No shirking," he said to himself. "Get it over. It's got to be done," — and he went in.

Sitting on one side of the big flat-topped desk, with her feet dangling above the floor, and her young profile silhouetted against a square of blue sky made by the open window, she was grasping the telephone in both hands and holding her daily conversation with the grocer. Amazing to think that only the other day she was sliding after him down the banisters with bobbed hair and bloomers.

"How much do you say they are this morning? Two cents more than yesterday? Then don't put them on the list, Mr. Budel. We shall have to live on our own potatoes if you go on like this." She threw a glance of welcome at Tom, whom she had been longing to see alone, and hurried to an end. "Must you go on sending me that mussy looking sugar? . . . Very well then, do. But you or someone will be responsible for driving the servants away, I tell you that. Oh, and now that my brother's back — yes, last night — I must have some marmalade. . . ."

"Great work," said Tom. On his father's side of the desk there was that snapshot of himself taken in a funk hole by Pot Stevens, — the last he ever took. Good old Dad.

"And do you still like jam, Tom?"

He ran his hand circularly over his diaphragm.

"Yes, strawberry, Mr. Budel. . . ."

"And how about some of those almonds and raisins?"

She made it so. It seemed like the old holidays again. "And don't forget the ginger ale."

"Imported," said Tom.

She shook her head, murmured "H. C. L.," added the word "domestic," closed with a cheery "Good morning," and hung up. "Now I'm through," she said and slid off the desk. He had on one of the shirts that she had mended. If it had been too tight under the arms then what would it be now? He looked inches broader. She was glad that he had n't had his hair cut by one of those barbers who ought to be allowed to shear nothing but sheep. How awful those poor boys looked with what appeared to be a toupée balanced on the tiptop of a head otherwise bald. Could anybody call himself a barber because he owned a few pairs of clippers and reeked of onions? She sensed that he had come to say something and longed for him to say it.

And so there was an uncomfortable pause.

"Some room," said Tom, striding about. He might have been talking to a junior officer.

"Yes. I love it."

"You camp here now, I see."

"I do mother's job now that she can't. I keep all the books here and the wages and all that. And when I telephone I'm not overheard. The daily

wrangle with the grocer and butcher, trying to keep the bills down." She laughed and spoke lightly in order to camouflage the slight unsteadiness in her voice. To have him back, — to see him doing precisely what she had dreamed that he would do, and look exactly as she had prayed that he might look! . . . Suppose she went over with a rush and put her face against his chest? Would that help?

He met her eyes and drew up short.

But she felt self-consciousness rise like a fog between them, — and sat down.

"How damned silly!" thought Tom. "If she were a girl I'd met a week ago and proposed to before I could clap a hand over my mouth I'd be talking poetry to her by this time in a chair only large enough for one." He loaded and lighted his pipe, perched himself on the edge of the desk and sent out a cloud of protective smoke like a Zeppelin in trouble.

"Father looks great," he said.

"He is," said Martha.

"I'd give a million if someone could put Mother right."

"So would I."

"How about our painting the old town a bit next week and seeing the best of the shows?"

"Oh, Tom, I'd love to!"

"Pick 'em out and let me have a list and I'll fix it." "Bad work," he added inwardly.

"But have n't you anyone else you'd rather take?"

Here was a chance! He was going to say "I'd rather take you, old girl, than any other feller's sister within a thousand miles," but what he did say was, "No, not just now," and metaphorically offered himself for court-martial.

But Martha, who knew brothers backwards and Tom like a book, had got by this all that she needed from him. Whatever he had managed to say about his shirts and however bookishly he had said it, it could n't have conveyed half so eloquently the things he had come to tell her. In the meantime he was itching to use his hands on something, that she knew. And she was keeping him, she could see. So she got up, energetically threw several tradesmen's books into a drawer and slammed it hard.

Tom jumped at the hint. "You're busy," he said. "I'll push off."

Her fountain pen had rolled off the desk. They bent down together to pick it up. Their heads met with a bang. She snatched a quick kiss and they laughed.

It was all over. There was nothing more required. He knew that she knew and away went self-consciousness.

"I'm going to function on my old engine," he said.

"All right. I'll come and have a look at you when I've got things going."

"Fine."

And then Biddy, — obviously Connemara via Brooklyn, came in with a letter.

"From Mrs. Mortimer," she said.

And as Martha took it her face flamed like a peony.

Tom wheeled round. "Oh, you know the Mortimers, don't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"I'll introduce you to Bill when he comes home. Some Major's old Bill, my dear. The finest soldier in the Army."

"Is he?" Luckily she was near enough to the desk to lean over it and put the blotting pad straight. Her secret was in her eyes. There'd be a burst of brother stuff if he saw it there.

"Well, so long, young 'un."

And she was alone with the letter against her heart. But she kissed her hand to the closed door. Tom had paid her the priceless compliment of inviting her to the theater and he had said what she most wanted to hear about Bill.

A wonderful brother, Tom!

IV

SHE ran to the window and watched him go out. He swung by with his face alight and his shoulders back. The boy whom she had delighted to fetch and carry for and interrupt, tease and go about with, had grown into a man. She thrilled with pride at his fitness and strength. He gave her a sense of personal satisfaction at having had a share in the war, an intimacy with the Thing, the Menace, which

had suddenly died, enabling the world to open its windows and begin to tidy up.

And then, flooded with the emotional intimations that she had grown into a woman, she opened Mrs. Mortimer's letter. It was beautiful writing, clear and large and flowing, suggestive of the type of woman who can wear a tiara without appearing to know it and manage a train without making men dance on hot bricks at her heels. "My dear," it ran, "I want you to come to the top of the hill, where the Seven Sisters are, at three o'clock this afternoon, exactly three o'clock. My love. L. M." That was all. There was nothing about the man who had haunted her dreams and filled her days with strange and wonderful thoughts that came to her like bars of music blown upon a breeze. There was no hint in these few equable lines that she was to see and speak to the man about whom she had woven the glamour of first love and whom she had protected with the armor of a girl's prayers. Mrs. Mortimer had sent many such notes before during the two long years which were over. But this one had been written in such excitement and eagerness that it sent a quiver of expectation all through Martha as she read it. She got from it something that told her that she was to see Bill, not any longer as the Wainwright Kid, the big-eyed, inarticulate girl to be treated as a flapper, but as a grown person who had earned the right to be taken seriously, a young Eve on the verge of womanhood, a competitor in life.

The note had been written by Mrs. Mortimer with Bill's statement of his feelings still ringing in her ears. It was the first step in her campaign to bring Martha forward, to plan a meeting that should be accidental and romantic, up on the hill above the rolling country, under the arms of the seven trees that were a landmark for miles around. Her plan was to be taken by Bill up to this spot from which the old house and all its property could best be seen and leave him with a prepared excuse to be found by the girl whose picture he had painted as the Miss Respectable of his responsible years. Better that they should meet like that, she thought, applying all her feminine cunning to the fulfillment of her last ambition, alone and apparently by chance, than formally on the veranda with a tea table between them and the Commodore near by with a tongue that could not be guaranteed — ogling and roguish and full of innuendoes. Let Bill fall into the belief that he was choosing for himself and not being coerced into a cut and dried scheme. Self-consciousness would thereby be lessened in his plan of attack, if it came to that, and Mrs. Mortimer was gambling that it would, knowing Martha and having listened to Bill. There was about all this a predestination that made a marriage inevitable, but Bill, simple for all his sophistication, must not get any inkling of the fact that he was being "worked." It might make him refuse, like a horse ridden at a hurdle. There was no time to be wasted in mistakes. Mrs. Mortimer thanked her stars that no clever manipulation was

needed so far as Martha was concerned. The child had unconsciously confessed, — the rest was merely, under the circumstances, a matter of propinquity. Thank God it was springtime, when from every bird and bush the urge to love and mate was diffused into the air. Everything was on the side of those two old schemers whose one remaining effort was to secure the future of the family. The possible danger of the Blue Room was minimized by Martha's love.

"Walk into my parlor," said the spider to the fly

Going to her side of the desk, with all its evidences of domestic management, Martha wrote her acceptance to the invitation. "Dearest Mrs. Mortimer, expect me at three o'clock, — exactly three o'clock to the second. Thank you. What a lovely day!"

And having sent it out to Carlo Cazazza, cousin of one of the Wops whose mowing machine clacked beneath her window, Martha stood for a moment in the middle of her father's den with life at full flood in her veins, ready and eager to meet the exquisite and significant experiences, strange and wonderful and intimate, which had arranged themselves like phantoms all through the vague years of her girlhood. Her thoughts danced wildly in front of her like fairies through a wood of silver birches. They led the way to the man whose photograph had been slipped beneath her pillow every single night for two tormenting years, — the man she had waved to as

he had gone away like a knight and waved to as he came back with the laurels of victory round his head. They beckoned her to follow them out of dreams into reality, singing as they went. . . .

But she dared not move. With a thumping heart she stood very still and fearful and tremulous. He might not like her. He might think that she was just a homely little person, looking wide-eyed at the world as a newly fledged bird does. The fact that she was one of the quiet ones who did domestic things might bore him. He might prefer, especially now, fresh from active service, the nippy little débutante, with a well-planned disclosure of bosom and calves, who talked like the front page of a newspaper, who darted like a fish, or, when jazz was absent, sat about like an ancient sphinx in lepidopterous attitudes. If she had had a close friend to whom she could have poured out all her doubts and fears she would have added something else. She would have said that if Bill didn't like her she would still keep his photograph under her pillow and go to the grave a spinster. Coming from a girl of not quite nineteen whose chance to see and mix with men had been small owing to the responsibilities thrown upon her by a constantly ill mother and the fact that she lived beyond the line of the ordinary commuter, this statement would probably have been received with the usual grain of salt. The first love of most girls is a mere preliminary canter round the ring. They force themselves to fall in love as they force themselves upon the inadequate dancing space

at the fashionable hotel, there to be jostled and wounded by a jam of wriggling lunatics. It is the desire to be smart, the force of example, the inability to refrain from imitation. They can be in love with several men at the same time. It is all a part of the inevitable growing pains of youth. But Martha was not in love. She was one of those odd little girls who are constitutionally unable to be merely in love. The Joan of Arc stuff was in her blood, and there was poetry in her soul. She had really and truly and greatly given all her heart to this man. He was her hero, the epitome of her dreams and desires. Already he had had three years of her freshest life. He had been taken into the inner chapel of her spirit. She had given him the concentrated essence of devotion that had in it the element of motherhood that belongs to everlasting love, and without which marriage has a pretty poor chance of working right. She was, if you like, old-fashioned. She had been born out of her time. And beyond everything she had not undergone, owing to family circumstances, the shallowing process of a modern girl's school. What she was she had remained, unthumbed, unsystemized, unsophisticated, — Martha herself. More herself for the constant association with a father who took life seriously though with eager joy and a mother whose duties she had had to take upon her shoulders. Miss Respectable according to all Bill's innate ideas.

V

BIDDY flung open the door of the den.

"Humphrey's killin' Tony," she screamed. "He 's killin' him, I tell yer," and rushed out again, skidding on the rugs in the hall, upsetting a large pale vase that was relegated to sticks and umbrellas and sending the sleek cat upstairs with her tail in the air and every hair on end.

Accustomed to the daily dramatization of small events which is ingrained in the childlike nature of the Irish, Martha followed the girl calmly into the garden. If Humphrey O'Brien was playfully chasing Tony Caruso with a wood chopper, and being the bigger man he frequently indulged in this hobby in his many hours of leisure, that was probably all there was to worry about.

But when Martha joined the still screaming maid on the terrace above the sloping rock-garden what she saw was this. The bandy-legged Tony, dodging and jumping like a squirrel, was frantically escaping from the stones hurled at him by the Irishman who, with a face scarlet with rage, was running him hard. Frightened out of his wits, the little Italian swung behind bushes, scampered up the incline of lawn, leaped from the ground with a hand clapped upon a wounded spot, turned to the slope that ran down to a wide potato patch, caught his foot in a tussock of grass and went rolling all the way down to the bottom. Here, hopeless and in a dire funk, he sent out shrill staccato sounds of oper-

atic terror, while the chauffeur, flatfooted and flabby from little exercise and the habit of eating everything in sight, bore turgidly down upon him. And as he landed his first kick in the ribs of his victim, Biddy's scream was taken up from the apple orchard by the cook, from the scullery window by the kitchen maid, and from behind the woodpile by Leonardo Benvenuto, whose loyalty to his friend did not urge him with any success to desert his policy of valorous discretion.

It was a most enjoyable break in the monotony of the day's routine for all, — except Tony.

And then Martha did things. With the sure-footedness of a mountain goat she leaped from stone to stone of the rock-garden, made small work of lawn and slope, and finally flung herself full tilt against the bulky chauffeur, whose right foot was raised to kick. Down he went like a log and there she stood like a young Diana, the blubbering Wop on his back on one side, the blaspheming Irishman full-sprawl on the other.

Startled out of his oily concentration by all these female screams Tom had darted out of the garage in time to see this gallant work, and in a flick of an eyebrow had joined the group, with smudges all over his grinning face. "Pretty good stuff," he said.

"All right, Tom," said Martha. "Leave this to me. I'm used to it. . . . Now then, get up, you two. A nice sight you make, I must say. I don't want any explanations. I can guess what hap-

pened. You called Tony a dirty little Wop and he said that most Wops had to be dirty through fighting the Germans while the Irish looked on. And you had to prove what a fine fighting man you are by going after somebody half your size. If this happens again, Humphrey, you go, quick. Is that understood? And as for you, Tony, cut more grass and do less talking and you won't have so many dramas to act to your wife. That's all I have to say, — this time."

She treated them like children, and they took it, though differently. The Wop rubbed his hairy arm over his face and brought forth a sheepish smile. He thanked his patron saint that Missa Martha had come to his rescue. By the grace of God he could go on cutting the grass, which meant a roof over his wife and food for his ever-increasing brood. He had not dared to say as much to thata dog Irishman as the younga lady. He could laugh. So he slanted his shoulder and murmured things and with a twinkle in his brown eyes went off, plucking high weeds on his way back. O'Brien got up slowly, with his lower jaw stuck out, humiliated to the very quick to have been found at full length by the son of the house to whom he had already been telling fairy tales about his great courage. "If I'd a' bin over there I'd 'a shown 'em somethin', sure." The usual stuff. He wagged his head from side to side and spat, after the most appalling preliminaries, to show that he was as good as annybuddy; and started to whistle while he dusted the dry earth from his

breeches. It was all very clever, according to his bog-headed way of thinking, and by the time that he had lurched halfway up the hill towards the house he was accepting as a fact the unholy lie that he meant to spread about after he had done, — Irish to the backbone.

Tom and Martha made their way back arm in arm.

“A big order, — running a house these days, young ’un.”

She laughed. “I should think so. Fine training as a supervisor of a lunatic asylum. Honestly, if things get much worse we shall have to be our own servants and rely on community kitchens. Wages go up as loyalty and intelligence go down, and why does a man like O’Brien have to behave himself when all he has to do is to walk into the next village and get another job with higher wages? And do you think he ever condescends to work on the engine if anything’s wrong with it? Not he. Away goes the car to the repair shop and up comes a nice big bill. He only washes the car and cleans the windows on Saturdays so that it looks smart for church for himself and the maids.” She pulled up short in what was about to develop into a long and detailed account of the whole servant problem and laughed again. “I talk like an old married woman, don’t I? And now I’d better go up and put mother out of suspense. She’s probably expecting a gruesome story of murder after all that screaming.”

And away she ran with a backward wave, — the note from Mrs. Mortimer burning a hole in her pocket.

VI

MRS. WAINWRIGHT'S mood when Martha made her report was that of every other woman of her type under similar circumstances. A born housewife who had been in complete control until her bronchial tubes had gone back upon her, she bitterly resented the fracas that had occurred in the garden. Those screams damaged the dignity of her home and, if there had been any near neighbors, would prove to them a certain inefficiency for which she was not responsible. Luckily and naturally, however, there was mixed with this feeling one of extreme self-satisfaction that no such outbreak could ever have occurred had she been at the wheel. She was able, therefore, to listen to Martha's swift account with sufficient tolerance to enable her to keep a curb upon her tongue. Martha was a good girl. She was doing her best. She was inexperienced, of course. The gift of controlling such utterly different people as the Irish and the Italians was not given to everyone. She was carrying on with an amount of pluck and unselfishness that was remarkable in one so young and so full of life. To criticize her efforts unfavorably would be unkind and ungrateful. Mrs. Thompson's Enid, it must be remembered, played bridge all day and danced all night. And Mrs. Warner's Vera commuted to

New York every morning to lunch at the Ritz and fox-trot at the Plaza. And both would have fainted at the mere idea of giving an order to the grocer. These facts must be borne in mind. Martha was indeed an exceptional girl, a chip of the old block. . . . So Mrs. Wainwright made allowances. She simply clicked her tongue and shook her head and murmured something about "these dreadful people." And the incident passed, with no small credit to the lady who fretted terribly at being temporarily deposed.

All the same the little interview between the mother and the daughter was not allowed to end as well as it began. The trouble was the old one of Mrs. Mortimer and her friendship. It cropped up again as it had often cropped up before during the last three years.

"My dear," said Mrs. Wainwright, putting aside a tin thing with a tube in it out of which she had been absorbing benzoin, — its pungent smell filled the very precise room, — "I think you had better mark the new towels this afternoon. Tom will need them, and it's a nice day for marking towels."

Martha repressed her laugh and also her urgent desire to ask what the weather had to do with that all-important job. "All right, Mother," she said.

"Bring them in here about three o'clock and I'll show you how I like them done."

"Three o'clock, — exactly three o'clock," — with the hope of meeting *him*.

"Won't six o'clock do as well, Mother?"

"No, dear. I shall be fresh from a nap then and I can give my mind to it. Father will be here at six o'clock to tell me all about the game with Tom. It must be three o'clock."

"The glass is set fair, Mother. It'll be just as good for towels at three o'clock to-morrow."

Mrs. Wainwright looked up sharply. She was unaffected by the slight touch of humor. Her ancestors had been of the Dr. Johnson variety of English and she had inherited a certain contempt for what she called mere humorous persons, as he did. She was quick to suspect that the white-haired lady who had no right to be so beautiful or so urbane after the sort of life that she had led, was at the back of this little argument. That absurd old man, too, with his wild record. They were both quite unfit for the society of a nice girl. Tom had mentioned Major Mortimer. Everyone had heard the gossip about him and his affairs with women. . . . At the same time something had been coming over Martha, — a sudden closing-up, a quick flash of unexpected independence, — which warned her that she was on ground marked "No Trespassers," — a startling and disconcerting notice for a mother to come up against.

"I would much prefer to-day, dear," she said, going carefully. "And surely you have n't made any engagements to take you away from home on the first day of Tom's return."

"Hardly away from home, Mother. Only across the brook."

Then it *was* Mrs. Mortimer once more, in spite of all that had been said. What could Martha, who was so sensible and forthright, see in this always half smiling woman about whom seemed to cling the echo of applause as it did about a retired actress of many dead triumphs? What queer influence was being exerted on her girl to draw her so frequently into that atmosphere of banished royalty? To the perfectly direct and simple Mrs. Wainwright to whom life was as cut and dried a thing as a draught board, these Mortimers, who had moved with such an adventurous disregard for the conventional rules from square to square, seemed to be rather dangerous people, flippant, grotesque, freakish and neurotic, — almost foreign. It was a constant source of amazement and anxiety to her that Martha with her traditions and example could bring herself to like them. It seemed to prove the existence of a kink somewhere. There was in it, indeed, something as unexplainable to her as there would have been to a New England Baptist Minister whose impeccable wife showed an irresistible desire to fox-trot with a professional dancer from a Broadway cabaret, — a lack of fastidiousness, a disregard of hygiene almost, that was very strange. “We are simple people,” she said to herself, over and over again, “who work hard and are honest and have no shams. We fear God and keep our powder dry. Martha is essentially one of us, thinking the same thoughts, striving to the same ends, eating the same food, wearing the same clothes,

made on the same model. There must be some unnatural and unhealthy magnet that is drawing her into constant association with that woman who is as much out of place in the everyday life of America as a nude bronze in a collection of Massachusetts china." . . . Poor little good lady! If she had been able to imagine that the key to her puzzle was Love the revolutionist, she would have needed the immediate services of Church as well as Science!

But, — the time had gone when she could take a stand and say, "Martha, I will not have this and I will not have that," and that new time had arrived, so bewildering to a mother, which had brought with it the inevitable notice board of "Private Road, — no trespassers."

She sat confused and nonplussed. The child was fearless and frank. She offered no deceit. She intended to go across the brook, — and the towels would not be marked at three o'clock, nice as the day was for that important piece of domesticity.

"Very well, dear," she said. "Have your own way. All I trust is that you will not live to regret it."

Martha knew very well that this enigmatical remark, hard to bear, referred to her friendship with the white-haired lady and not to her postponement of towel marking. If her mother had been on her feet, well and strong, she would have let herself go and taken up the cudgels on behalf of the woman who was so wonderful as the mother of Bill and

whom she admired and esteemed as a sweet and rather pathetic figure, united to her by their mutual love for the returned soldier. But invalidism raised a protective trench round her mother and she held her peace. She simply told herself that her mother was prejudiced and, by the taking up of a book, took her dismissal without anger although with the natural impatience of youth. She liked the Mortimers and found them charming and unexpected. She was fascinated by their warm old house which reeked with history. She was appealed to by their wanting to know her and by their graciousness and manners and, above all, she went to them for the sense of comfort and consolation that she needed as one who loved without return.

"All mothers are like this, I suppose," she thought, and went on to the next job, with the song of fairies in her heart.

VII

"COME on, Tom."

"Coming, Dad."

The boy swarmed upstairs for a pipe and to stick his head into his mother's room for a moment. It was a beastly shame that she was caged in at such a time.

So Jonathan Wainwright went out to wait in the garden. His new suit of golf clothes made him feel a trifle self-conscious. He had never taken the trouble to dress himself up. It was rather nice

though. And after all Brown, Jones, and Robinson got away with it. . . .

The car was at the door with Humphrey in charge full of cutlets and potatoes, his face cleaner than usual and the same old grin at the corners of his mouth. He was a different man when the men of the house were about. But the belt of bushes to the left of the house made a good screen, and behind this the man of fifty-two, most of whose good muscle had been devoted to business, slipped out of view and made thirty-six attempts to touch his toes, — tummy a bit in the way. Curse fifty-two.

The strange trickle of excitement that he had taken with him to town was strong enough now to send sparks from the tips of his fingers. . . . A dozen times during his morning's work, pushing everyone hard and putting an amount of pace into his staff that left them a little breathless, the trickle had made him leap to his feet, forget what he was dictating, grip an imaginary driver, take a firm and proper stance in the middle of his room and beat a metaphorical ball clean through the office window to bounce from one Gargantuan building to another and fall away down into the narrow slit that called itself a street. . . . He had been early for the homeward train, but this thing in his veins, playing up and down his spine, had sent him down the steps to the Lower Level of the swarming Grand Central like a boy let out of school. He was stealing an afternoon for the first time in memory. It was epoch-making. . . . Time after time on the journey

through the parterres of the City the words of his paper had slid off the sheet in a heap and he had been surcharged with a passionate urge to sway along to the engine room and give the driver a thumping bribe to send the train into the air. It was a gorgeous day with a warm sun and a sky as clear as crystal. Was he going to be able to keep his end up against that boy of his who was so fit and confident and well oiled and prove that although he was now a man of fifty-two, office-stiff and unexercised, he had enough kick left to drive as far and take the hills without panting? It was absurd. A man could n't have worked like a traction engine for thirty-five years and do those things. He must take two strokes and follow round, halving a few holes at the best. . . . Amazing to think that this was the lad who, apparently a few years ago, had looked up to him with round admiring eyes as one unbelievably out of reach, — the lad he had carried on his back, lugged along on a sled and left after many holidays on the steps of the prep school, a sturdy open-faced boy putting up a grim fight to keep a stiff upper lip. How many yesterdays had slipped away since he had heard the incoherent patter that used to be called prayers and issued the ultimatum in his den to the little scamp with the dirty face and a hole in the seat of his pants? . . . Hey, Hey, Hey, — twenty-five and fifty-two, — and here was this Tom of his, over whom he and his wife had had many fits because of such crises as whooping cough and measles and broken ribs, fresh

from rubbing shoulders with death and shell shock and trench fever, to all of which they had sent him forth with pride. . . . Amazing, — and very good.

It was behind the bushes that Martha found old man Wainwright pretending to be deep in the study of rose bugs. She straightened his slightly cock-eyed tie and gave him a kiss. "Show him the way round, Dad," she said.

"Impossible, honey, — unless he's off his game."

"Well, he will be. He has n't seen a club for ages."

"There's something in that! . . . But I've only had Sundays all my life. I'm a boob at the game. Walk round with us, Pansy face?"

"I'd have loved to, Dad, but I have to go and see Mrs. Mortimer."

"Have to? Is it an order?"

Mother had been talking. "No, but I like her, and" She did n't dare to trust herself.

The parental arm went round the young shoulders. "Well, go easy, honey. It would be impertinent to interfere, — you, as trustable and full of sense as your mother, and that's going some. The only thing is, is n't this good lady a bit out of our scope? She won't unsettle my little girl, will she, with her stories of society triumphs, and all that? That's the only thing that worries me a little. You can't go on the bat and do what you're doing at the same time, you know. I wish you could, sometimes, when I see some of those elderly kids get on the train, dressed up to the eyes, — and

then I look at them again and draw comparisons and I don't know what I wish."

Martha put her hands on his chest and looked him full in the eyes. "Have you ever heard me grumble?"

"No, honey."

"Do you ever think you will?"

"No, honey."

"Then what's the idea, Dad? When I'm sick of trying to be as much like you and Mother as I can that'll be the time for me to cut loose and paint my face. And before I do I'll give you a month's notice so that you can look out for somebody else to do my job. Is that fair?" She held out her hand.

And he caught it and yanked her into his arms and kissed her. He was a lucky man in his children. He had n't worked to the almost total extinction of muscle and all that keeps it up for nothing. And he said so, stumblingly and rather shyly, — the slight, frank, flowerlike thing in his arms, — warmly, the fourth wall of both being wide open for once. "And don't think," he wound up, "that because Tom's in the limelight he's the only hero in the house. He is n't, my dear, and don't I know it! There ought to be a string of ribbons on your chest and there are when I look at you."

And a wonderful look gleamed in the girl's eyes and a little tremble ran over her lips. But she laughed as usual as she said, to bring things back to

normal, "We're a nice little family, we are, aren't we, Dad?"

And out came Tom.

VIII

MARTHA waved after the car.

The young soldier and the man with white hair and many lines looked like brothers that afternoon. Good fighters, both.

She went upstairs. Tom's whisper on his way to the car made her as proud of him as of anything that he had done, and gave her an almost blinding insight into his newly developed imaginative side. "I'm going to be off my game. Dad's got to win this time. He needs the tonic."

This, the little emotional talk with her father and her own pulsing excitement at the prospect of seeing and speaking to Bill Mortimer made the intimacy and quietude of her own room desirable and necessary. It was good, as it had always been good, to shut life out sometimes and stand hedged-in privately in the small oasis where she could be and look and think her very own self among her very own things. Here she could let herself down, loosen the strings that had always to be at concert pitch and be precisely as her mood made her feel. At that moment her mood was composed of several emotions, — joy at the happiness of having Tom back, supreme pride in her father's recognition of her efforts and a strange sense of fear at what the meeting on the hill might lead to. It was the last of these that

hurried her to her glass and caused her to examine herself with a new sort of criticism. If she were at last to be put to the test to which all her dreams had led, and she wanted this unendurably, could she meet it with any hope? . . .

Deep down under all her capability and steadiness there was the vague urgency for passion and romance, the love-hunger of a girl trembling on the edge of womanhood, something that sent the blood flying to her cheeks but left her unashamed. She was loved by father and mother and Tom. She had the supreme assurance of being trusted and relied upon. She could imagine no home that offered her greater security, a dearer anchorage. But her secret estimate of life was incomplete without just that one human being who needed the touch of her, to whom she was the one dominating fact, who could be drawn by her magnet from the center of a crowd, and to whom she could answer with the whole strength and steadfastness of a soul utterly delivered up. And this meant that while she stood in the heart of a home she was homeless because only with Bill could she win the completion that made home of wherever he was. Untrifled with and unfrittered, the vague urgency was a stronger one for being concentrated. Bill or no one was her watchword, and it rang through her body, like the reverberation of a bell. . . .

She saw a slight young figure, not tall and not short; held well, with straight back and shoulders set square; an oval face with large wide-apart eyes

like those of a deer and with the same straight soft look; a nose that showed character and sensitiveness; a large full-lipped mouth with a tendency to laughter; fair hair in which there were touches of bronze. Nothing arresting and beautiful as she would have liked; a good deal, in fact, like that of hundreds of other girls of her class and breeding, — health and cheeriness and an unpreventable normality all about her, unmistakably of the country. Nothing either romantic or picturesque, but tidy and neat and even ordinary. . . . But what she failed to see was the spring-look of girlhood, the white fire of youth, the glory that makes all young things the masters of life, the freshness that belongs to the morning. . . .

So she turned away dissatisfied and humble. She would never do. "A smudge of a thing," she told herself, "not a bit like the sort of girl that he could love." But with quick deft fingers she started to re-do her hair and presently, everything going wrong, to change her frock, instinctively entering into the competition of Eve, hope seeing a star and listening love hearing the rustling of a wing. Not daring to give herself a final look of scrutiny for fear that she might turn coward and stay away, she stood for a moment with the photograph pressed to her lips passionately, all-desiring, — and fled.

Past mother's room on tiptoe, — her nap was so important; down the stairs with a complete familiarity with those that creaked, across the hall that was as supremely conservative as the rest of the house,

and out into the sun, — warm and electrical. The scent of spring met her and the sweet smell of new-cut grass. The petals of apple blossoms volplaned in the light breeze. Birds piped and bees went hunting with the indefatigable optimism that belongs to them, and to collectors of old furniture. With a trained eye on the borders which those two slipshod Wops were never loath to miss, down she went to the road, and over this expensive item to the wood whose red carpet was alive with sprouting green. And then out into the sparkling open to the bridge across the brook which divided her father's property from the old Mortimer place, — lingering a little and depressed.

At three o'clock, exactly three o'clock, she climbed the hill on which the Seven Sisters stood grouped affectionately and conscious of being seen the year round, bare or leaf-laden, from far and near.

Mrs. Mortimer was unpunctual. She had expected to find the white-haired lady standing, a gracious figure, cut clear against the sky. But it would be helpful to be alone for a little, to draw in the air. She went slowly towards the bench beneath the trees, the old meeting place. A crowd of memories rose to meet her. How often they had sat there, hand in hand, those two, the woman whose life was all behind her and the girl who had not yet broken through the hoop, and in long silences listened figuratively to the roar of guns which put the lives of their two men in constant jeopardy. How often they had whispered of what they would

do and give up if only God saw fit to let these two men off and send them back safe and well. How often their united prayers had gone up from that little hill like a thin trickle of smoke to the gate of Heaven. . . .

The virile undergrowth had covered the path that her feet had made and she went forward with hardly a sound. But a twig snapped, and someone, lying full stretch with his hands under his head, sat up quickly and watched her come, — Miss Respectable.

It was Bill.

And down below, the white-haired lady, having played her first card in the last and biggest of her schemes, returned to her garden, smiling.

IX

“THE flower of a girl, with the dew on her and a morning hymn in her eyes, — all to myself, to treat right and play the good old game by, and a young Bill and a tiny Lylyth, the country year in and year out, and home.” . . . Those were the words that he had used to Teddy Jedburgh in his rooms the night of his return when he had confessed to the prodigal son’s longing to indulge in an orgy of sentimental reconstruction. . . . And here stood the Wainwright Kid, the memory of whose welcoming smile still rang like a little bell in his soul.

Bill scrambled to his feet and put up his hand to take off the hat that was lying in the grass.

“You came to meet Mother, but she had to go

back to the house for something. How do you do? I'm awfully glad to see you. Will you wait until she comes up again? Do sit down somewhere. On this bit of rock. It's dry. . . ." What on earth was he saying? If this had been Susie Hatch with her free and easy way, or Jeanne Dacoral with her gamin stuff and her comic nose that was as artificially white as a marshmallow, or any of the other little things of the stage and semi-society who had made his rooms their happy hunting ground, there would not have been any of this ludicrous constraint about him. He knew their language and their way of looking at things, what alone was calculated to amuse them, City pigeons, supreme egotists all. But this child-woman, with eyes as clean and sparkling as the waters of a trout stream, who stood as erect as a daffodil, disconcertingly dignified . . . this young country thing who had emerged from girlhood but was still a girl, who had no tricks, who did n't burst, open-mouthed, into meaningless laughter or a greeting of the latest slang, but who remained, very quiet and friendly, supremely simple, meeting his eyes fully, smiling. . . .

He had told his people that when he met Miss Respectable, if ever he did, he must translate himself and even think in different words, — and here she stood like another and a baby sister of those seven trees. Good God, it was going to be difficult. . . . It is n't to be supposed that never on his way through the good old days had he had any

dealings with young women of his own class,—that he had clung entirely to the stables and the stage. It came easier to him to herd with the naturally unnatural little people of these sets than with the unnaturally natural products of wealth and society. It called for less effort and he had been born lazy. He preferred not to work if he could help it and to be amused rather than to be amusing. He had taken dozens of the Miss Respectables into dinner all over the world and to dances and all that in the usual way, but they were the sophisticated Miss Respectables who would have taken the term as the worst kind of opprobrium and turned an icy shoulder. They were not his own idea of Miss Respectable, dug out from under a pile of years from one of early idealisms, epitomizing just such a girl as Martha Wainwright with her tradition and environment and example and responsibility and dignity and simplicity—monumental and unconscious simplicity,—who was as much of the country as apple blossoms and lilies of the valley,—and here she stood, come true, a living dream, a thing of thought created into flesh and blood, a new Galatea. . . . It was a big, startling, uneasy, emotional moment for Bill, who was going to be a good boy now.

And when she said “Thank you” and sat down on the chosen stone, patterned with the patches of sunlight that came through the branches, he did n’t lie at her feet and gaze up at her as was his wont; he sat some little distance away and nursed his

knees, hunting about the stretch of valley for something to say, and say right.

And the thing that Martha hoped above all others was that he could n't hear the thumping of her heart.

It was a difficult silence to break.

Martha made a tremendous effort. "Tom has been telling us about you," she said.

Her brother! It had n't occurred to him all that time. The boy assumed a sudden importance. "Good chap, Tom Wainwright. Steady and reliable, born soldier. His cheerfulness made him worth an immense amount to the regiment." He did n't know that he was capable of talking stuff like that. . . . Sweet thing. She had eyes like a deer, and charming little wrists. Go easy, now.

"He said those things about you."

"Did he? That was nice of him."

If only the photograph could have smiled like that! . . . "He's playing golf with father this afternoon." It was very handy to have Tom.

"Hope he'll play with me. There was n't a man out this morning." Would there ever be that light in her eyes when she talked about him? What on earth had his mother meant last night when she had said that her mind was a blank? Was n't Martha a little pal of hers? He had described this very girl in every detail. It was perfectly amazing.

"He'll be at home every day," she said.

"Great. I'll hike him out."

After which, Tom having been used to bridge the

first surprise, things began to go a little more smoothly. Bringing all her pluck to her rescue, and all that she had acquired of self-restraint to the prevention of any signs of the excitement that surged over her, Martha managed to talk about the weather and the country and the Seven Sisters and the Mortimer house. It was well and splendidly done, almost amazing in one who had had no training in social camouflage, in the art of making bricks with straw. Had Mrs. Mortimer been in the position of eavesdropping she would have conferred upon her protégée the Order of Social Merit. All that Bill had to do was to interject the necessary "Reallys" and "Yes, indeeds" to make things almost easy. And this he did, finding new points to admire in this charming child who babbled so unaffectedly and who more and more fitted into the empty niche in his mind which the reaction of war had made it so vital to fill.

It was an epoch-making afternoon for them both, — the girl of first love, and the man who believed that he had frittered love away but wanted to respect and possess. And finally, the shadows lengthening, it was she who got up to go home, duties calling. And she, the steadier of the two, although the beating of her heart seemed to echo among the trees, who held out her hand to say good-by, triumphant and despairing in never once having said a single thing to help her cause, or give an inkling to her emotions. But there was something to build on in the grip that he gave her hand and in

his stumble of words. "You were the last to wave me away and the first to wave me back. When can I see you again?"

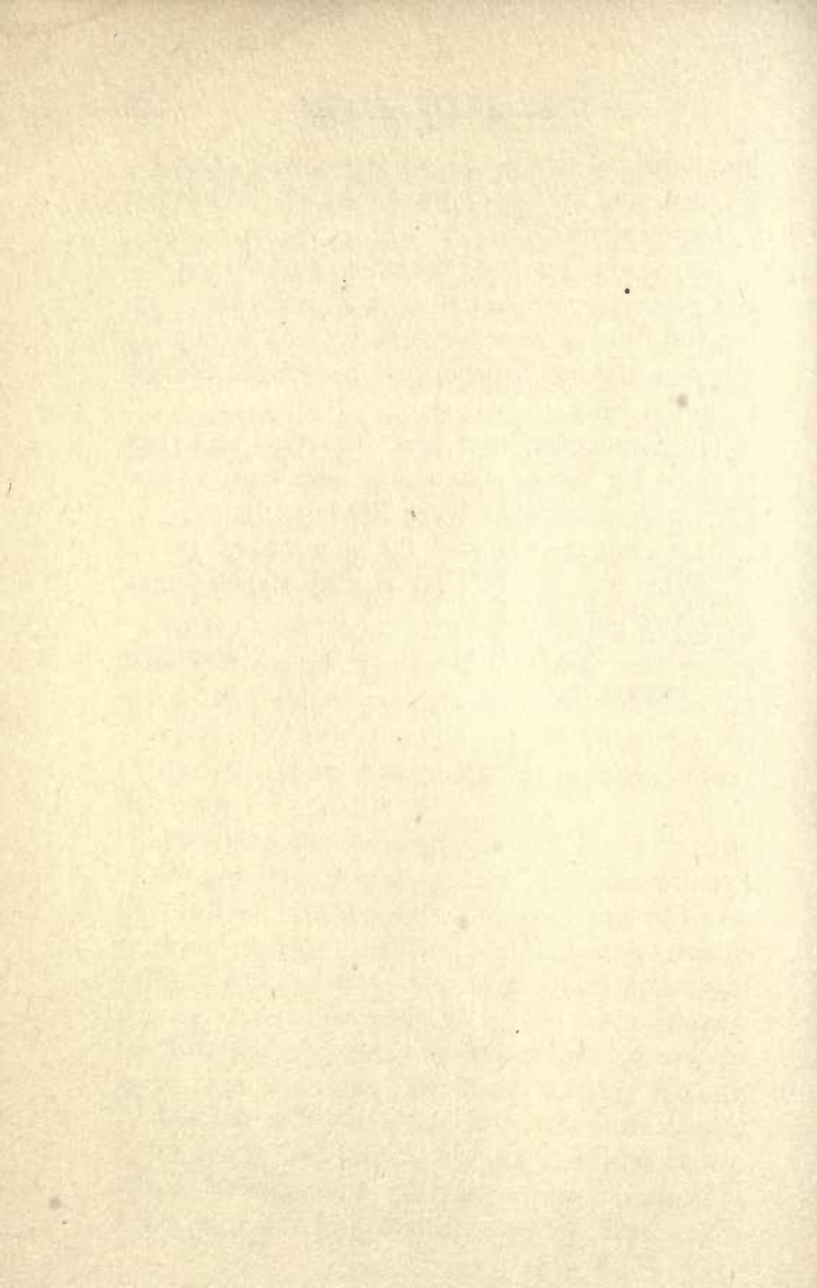
And as she went over the bridge that divided the two properties, the fairies were all about her, singing and dancing, hope had seen the first faint glimmer of a star and listening love had caught the rustling of a wing.

The Commodore and Mrs. Mortimer had risen to dress for dinner, late and a little flustered and filled with speculation, when Bill burst in.

"I've met her," he said, "I've met her."

"Who, my dear?" As if they did n't know, those two old schemers.

"Miss Respectable. . . . It's . . . absolutely . . . marvelous."



PART IV

I

It was June.

In Mrs. Mortimer's old garden, all the roses that she had collected and imported and nursed so tenderly through the younger months were in their first and freshest blooms. It was a sight to awaken optimism in a scientist.

Free of all the hard and fast conservatism that clings to most garden-makers the white-haired lady had planted her roses quite irrespective of their social status. An old Dundee Rambler whose forbears had been happy enough to cluster yearly over a disused gate in an English lane had rushed up and broken out among the branches of a tall stiff Holly tree which stood in the middle of a bed within speaking distance of a group of Mesdames Lambard. A Maiden's Blush from Sussex, as crowded with small blossoms as the steps of a village Sunday school with little girls in their best white frocks, drew in the aristocratic scent of the Viscountess Folkestone. A fountain of cabbage roses, sweetest of all sweet things, looked down without a tremor upon the lovely Celeste, and the Himalayan Rosa

Brunonii with her long blue leaves flirted with a Papa Goutier brought from a garden that overlooked the Seine at Caudebec. Among the collection of Tea Roses all carefully tied down to trellis rails the Bouquet d'Or gleamed like the morning lights in a Florida sky and all down the side that was nearest to the house great bushes of Rosa Polyantha made a screen that took the breath away.

Made-up for riding, although he no longer dared to risk a shaking in the saddle, Barclay Mortimer walked about the stable square flipping his boot, and thinking back to the good old days when he rode forth every morning to watch his string of thoroughbreds file out for exercise. They were the times, damme. The air crisp, the early sun setting the smooth backs of the rolling Downs alight, the ring of many hoofs on the dry turf, a lark throbbing his way to the sky, and the dear lady getting color into her cheeks as she rode at his side, — one of the several dear ladies. Curse Anno Domini.

Bill had gone out on one of the Irish hunters, and the Old Rip, dressed horsy even if his horsy days were over, waited for him, while Martha and Mrs. Mortimer sat among the roses. . . . It had been the devil's own job to get his boots on. Denham was undergoing a rest cure before he tackled the business of pulling them off. Language had been flung about, and nerves torn. But the result had been worth it. They were good legs for boots, and even the much-tried valet had to confess that the old

gentleman looked pretty 'ot stuff as he swaggered out in his tight-fitting coat of huge checks, his white stock with its little diamond fox, and his brown bowler cocked over his ear. It was a dog's life, with the Major back, what with making up for golf that never was played, and for tennis, just to look on while Bill and young Wainwright covered the court, and for tea to which Miss Martha dropped in nearly every afternoon. . . . "Somethin' doin' in that direction," if Denham could feel the way the wind blew. "Only 'ad to cock an eye at the Major to see that. Sloppy, that 's what 'e was." And he did n't wonder. A reg'lar flower of a girl. Far too young for that chip of the old block, she was, though. A beastly shame. Still, it was none of his business. Nor Albery's neither. And after all Bill was being a good boy now all right. Put a paper weight on that there new leaf, from the look of it. A bit of a blow for them bits o' fluff in town, he'd bet. Well, well, there were changes in the air, that was certain. The war had a lot to answer for. . . . The eyes and tongues of the servants' quarters had let nothing go by.

For two reasons which seemed to him to be good Bill cut his ride short. One was that Teddy Jedburgh was expected at the house that afternoon for a fortnight's visit, and the other that Martha was due to tea, having missed the previous day. He chuckled when he found the immaculate old man hanging about the yard. He was in too beatific a mood to be impatient of being constantly dogged by

his father. It was good to be able to provide the dear old boy with means, however childish, of breaking the monotony of his daily round, and he rejoiced in the fact that there was enough vitality left in that once active body even to affect activities of which it was incapable.

The sweating hunter was led away, with flicking tail.

"How do you like him, Bill?"

"One of the best. Goes like a bird." He caught sight of Martha in the heart of the garden. It seemed right that she should be there. He had missed her yesterday, strangely. "No sign of Teddy yet?"

"Not yet. He's not due for half an hour. The car was timed to leave your rooms at half past two. It's a good two hours' run. Walk round the stables with me." The old man was a little jealous of his wife and even of Martha, much as he wanted to see the fulfillment of his last ambition.

Having imagination Bill knew this and took his father's arm. But he threw a quick surreptitious glance towards the garden. He had said, in pulling down his fourth wall, "that there could be no first lover stuff about him in his reconstruction plan, that he had n't got to fall passionately in love, and that sort of thing." A month ago he did n't honestly think that he was capable, after having distributed his love so lavishly, of reviving the divine spark. But this child, with her large steady eyes and virginal simplicity, had stirred other and rarer emo-

tions than those of passion. Her youth and trustfulness touched all his sense of respect, her sudden flashes of love-hunger startled him like a crash of cymbals in a minuet, and her strength of will and power of presenting an attitude of impersonality that made her a little sister of the roses put him on his mettle. She was interesting, unexpected, brave, practical, wistful and as guileless and aboveboard as a spring morning.

The Commodore beamed. Had he exaggerated in the description of his close relationship with his son Bill in that delectable memoir? Let anybody take a look at them now. . . . It was the tenth time that Bill had been walked round the stables. It was, therefore, the tenth time that he had been obliged to listen to exactly the same anecdotes about the various horses and the way in which they were bred. But it was in front of the loose box of "Beauty Boy", an old and bony hunter with four white stockings and a wall eye, that the longest story was sprung. He had been in the habit of carrying a certain lady a year or two before the war and for that reason would be treated with every consideration until such time as he gave his final kick. "The last of 'em, Bill, the last of my loves, my boy. And what a dear beautiful creature, eh. You remember her, of course. The old house at Epsom appealed to her and racing was in her blood. . . . Not altogether gone, those happy days. The lamp of memory lights me through my dullest hours."

Bill led him away. Not for the first time the

irony of all this hit him pretty hard. While his father delighted to bask in the pale glory of his past misdeeds he, on the contrary, was eager to forget the past and push his foot into the door of the future. And the difference in the point of view lay merely in a matter of age.

Knowing that the old man intended to make another change of clothes before he dressed for dinner, in order to keep up the pretence of being hot from riding, Bill escorted him to the house. Martha waved from the garden and both men replied.

"A charming girl, a delightful girl," said the Commodore. "Eh, Bill, eh, my boy?" He was under a most solemn promise to the white-haired lady to let things run their course without putting his finger on the pulse. But it was permissible to endeavor to find out the state of Bill's feelings by dropping a fly now and then, just a blue Jock Scott.

And that afternoon Bill, like a hungry salmon, swallowed it whole. He had been curiously shy for the past month. "She's *the* girl, Father," he said gravely. "She's so utterly *the* girl and I love her so much that I'm in a dead funk about trying my luck." . . . And he wheeled round and marched off to where his mother sat with Martha.

The old man watched the tall figure until it became blurred against the background. His sight was far from good. There was a smile of huge excitement on his over-massaged face. In the few words that he had drawn so unexpectedly out of his

son there was enough news to fill his wife with joy and triumph. Her propinquity scheme had worked to perfection, it seemed to him. He might, even yet, make queer grandfatherly noises at a little bundle of humanity that guaranteed the future of his house!

Denham, with the irritating air of one who knew his duty, was waiting for him in the dressing room.

"A red tie, Denham, a red tie," he sang out. "This is a red-letter day, you much-tried worm."

II

BARCLAY MORTIMER was right, for once, in believing that he had a piece of news for his wife. As a rule his great discoveries were like taking coals to Newcastle or imparting the headlines of yesterday's newspaper to a diligent student of current events. This time, however, he had got hold of something that would send all her worries flying and bring back her peace of mind.

During the month that had slipped quietly away since Mrs. Mortimer had brought Bill and Martha together so cunningly, she had received two distinct shocks. She had considered herself to be quite certain of Martha. Under the girl's naïve dignity it was easy to see the flutter of her heart when Bill was near, easy to read, behind her mask of lightness, the all-consuming hope that burned in her eyes. The little defenses erected by her protégée in order to protect her secret fell before the white-haired lady's knowledge of human nature. Hith-

erto, however, she had looked upon Martha as merely a sweet, fresh girl, most suitable as the future mother of Mortimers. She now had to confess, after these days of closer examination, that she was not just the pliable, malleable little person of her supposition, to be "brought forward" at the right moment and willingly sacrificed on the altar of the Mortimer ambition. With some concern she had discovered that the child, as she had persisted in regarding her, had grit and courage, and, what made her plan less easy, the sort of pride that demanded a full and complete return of the love that she had nursed during those three anxious and deplorable years. And the shock came from her knowledge of the fact, most surprising and disturbing, that Martha was not the sort of girl who had anything whatever of the martyr in her constitution and could not be brought forward, under any pressure or persuasion, unless in Bill's proposal there was all the fine fervor of a lover. Pride? The child had as much of it as there is steel in a skyscraper. It was her backbone.

That shock received, with its subsequent food for thought and consternation, the other one was almost immediately provided by Bill. Being her son he had been easier to read than Martha. There is never anything very complex about a man. The romance with which she had taken care to flavor that first meeting had worked. Bill had come back from it as pleased as Punch. Here, by the grace of God, was Miss Respectable. Things looked good,

But there was a humbleness and a lack of confidence about him which, instead of fading out under the influence of propinquity, as it generally does, grew stronger. He talked about his age. He began to throw stones at himself for his youthful ubiquity. And the more he found in Martha to respect and admire the more doubtful he became of the honesty of asking her to marry him, when he had so little to give in return for all that she would bring him. Honesty, — think of it! The free and easy Bill, the complete man of the world, was not to be found in this new and irresolute Bill who put himself in the scales with a dear nice girl, and was completely outweighed. That was the shock. That was what gave the white-haired lady a series of sleepless nights. It must be remembered, also, that Bill had said that there could be no first lover stuff in this matter of marriage and reconstruction and Mrs. Mortimer was no believer in miracles. It was altogether too much to hope for. She did not read into Bill's queer moods — his sudden desire to be alone for hours at a time, his long silences in the drawing-room after dinner, his restlessness and obvious discontent with himself — that he had fallen headlong into love. If she had she would have ceased instantly to worry, knowing from long experience that love eventually carries even honesty before it and would provide Bill with all the excuse he needed to go in and win. If he could give Martha love, he would presently argue, he could offer her everything that he had and under those

conditions his conscience would lie easy and his Blue Room remain locked.

Teddy Jedburgh was coming down, it was pretty obvious, to a set of cross purposes and curious tangents of temperament that might make him regretful to leave the city. A mother who seemed to see her pet scheme in jeopardy, his pal who was so much in love that he was afraid of being refused, and a girl whose pride was so strong and unbendable that she would love and lose rather than love and be sacrificed.

And it had all looked so easy.

III

"WELL," asked Bill, "how are you to-day?"

Martha smiled up at him. "As well as ever," she answered.

Throwing a quick glance from one to the other, — Bill pretending to be as off-hand as though talking to a sister-in-law, Martha acting the part of a girl who was obliged to be civil to this man because she was a friend of his mother, — Mrs. Mortimer was seized with a spasm of disappointment, not un-mixed with irritation. Good Heavens, what were they playing at, these two? Already a precious month had fallen from the calendar and the much-to-be-desired marriage was no nearer than it had been. Queer creatures, human beings, with all the handicaps of pride and conscience, vanity and temperamental kinks!

"I see Albery fluttering on the veranda," she said.

"I am probably needed to speak to someone on the telephone." And she rose, smiled an apology and left them together. It was not up to her usual form. It was indeed the work of an amateur. But for the moment she had lost her touch, being non-plussed at the criss-cross way in which things were going. She was human too, even at her time of life.

Bill watched her go, grateful for her sense of sportsmanship but depressed beyond words that he was unable to take advantage of it. What on earth could this epitome of everything that was sweet and springlike find in him? It was an impertinent idea. Nineteen and a battered thirty-four. It was absurd.

Martha made room on the stone bench. How well he looked in riding kit. She loved him best like that. He brought her photograph to life. But what was the use? He did n't care. She was only the kid from the house on the other side of the brook. "How did 'White Star' go?" she asked, casually.

"A good beast," he said. "Absolutely wasted here. He ought to be hunted three days a week. Jogging along a bridle path bores him stiff. Hard luck." What a darling she was in that jolly little frock!

"When are you going to exercise your polo ponies?"

"Oh, I dunno. One of these days, I suppose."

He was getting as bored as "White Star," it

seemed to her, — and for much the same reason. There was n't anything to keep him in that quiet place, now that he had given a month to his people. She dreaded the moment when he would say that he was going off somewhere to do things. Sitting about among flowers did n't suit him. But his friend was coming to stay, and that meant another few weeks of him, at any rate Dreams never came true!

A strained silence came upon them.

Bees carried on, and a big robin hauled at a worm with which to fill a red and gaping mouth and the scent of roses cloyed the warm air. What a place and what a month for love, — the one real thing that life could give.

Martha made another effort. "Are you going to write a book about the war, Major Mortimer?"

Bill darted a look at her. Was this a joke? No, she was quite in earnest. But she won a laugh and that was something. He seemed to have forgotten how to laugh lately. "I should n't know how to begin," he said, "or how to go on if I did. A couple of pages of slang and bad spelling and I should be through. I'm not an educated man. I'm only a polo player." He was considerably flattered at her question, all the same. "And talking about war books," he added, "I got on the phone to Brentano's the other day, to order a war book by a British officer who was attached to us for a bit, an awful good chap who had seen the whole show and been wounded three times. They told

me that war books had dropped dead twenty-four minutes after the armistice was signed. Can you believe it? It reminds me of the women's shops on Fifth Avenue that display bathing dresses with the snow on the ground. Millions of men died so that the good old crowd might continue to swarm in Fifth Avenue, and what do they care? The war is n't over yet by a long chalk but it's the next sensation that everybody's waiting for. Memory's the shortest thing there is, these days."

She had set him going. And it did n't much matter what he said. It was his voice that she wanted to hear.

And catching something of her sympathy he went on, glad enough to empty the accumulation of some of his silences. "It's pretty natural, I suppose. All bands play lively tunes on the way back from funerals. One down, t' other come on. There's the mopping-up process to begin, the reconstruction business. And that's all I'm thinking about. The new start, beginning all over again, setting the house in order after the debauch, so to speak. That's the next job plain enough and I wish it was as easy as it looked." He was thinking aloud rather than talking, — worrying the thing that was uppermost in his mind; going over the old arguments, in his doglike way, in the hope of coming out at the right place. He had not bothered to use his brain much. It was completely out of practice. "Here's the old house and all that it stands for. And here are my father and mother with the sands running out.

It's up to me to take myself by the scruff of the neck and become serious. But who's going to take me seriously? That's the point. I want to plant roots and settle down and take a wife and all that. Who's wife? It's going to be mighty difficult to find a girl to become Mrs. Bill Mortimer, — I mean *the* girl. I'm not like Tom Wainwright, in the first flush of giddy youth and all that. I'm in the middle of things, with precious little to show for the beginning"

Someone laughed. He dried up instantly, surprised and self-conscious. He looked round and caught a pair of brown incredulous eyes filled with amusement, — frank and unmistakable amusement. Good Lord, what had he said that was so infernally funny?

Martha had her laugh out. It came to an end with a ring of impatience. "Who's going to take you seriously?" echoed. "In the middle of things, — you! Why is it going to be mighty difficult?" And then pride holding up its huge hand, *she* dried up, just as she was about to knock all her walls down and stand among the débris, utterly exposed. . . . If she had possessed even half the knowledge of men that belonged to the vast majority of the girls of her age she would have been able to see in the mood of this man, in his humbleness and depression, the fact that he only wanted one kind word to stumble into a confession of love. And in her eagerness and joy she would have given him not one kind word but a hundred,

and in less than two minutes have been hiding her face against his shoulder. But what did she know of men other than a father and a brother and Wop gardeners and Irish chauffeurs, and the ice-man and grocers' assistants, the piano-tuner and the memories of Tom's inarticulate schoolfellows who had followed each other about like geese during holiday visits ages ago. But in Bill's mention of a vague girl that he had to "find" she saw herself as an intangible thing still who had failed to come through, who had not materialized. It was a devastating shock.

And under the sting of the laugh that would have told any other man all that he wanted to know, Bill, going about like a cat on hot bricks in his dealings with this Miss Respectable, felt like a yawl that had suddenly lost the wind. She thought him funny, and no wonder. He was a laughable object to a young thing to whom he must appear to be in the veteran class. A nice damn thing for a champion philanderer to find that the first real love of his life was as far out of reach as the sun!

He got up with an absurd attempt at a grin. He was not going to open himself up for another such laugh if he knew anything about it. "Tea's about on," he said. "Shall we go up?"

"It's the only thing I'm thinking about," she answered, and led the way up along the narrow rose-lined path, with her chin in the air.

IV

A CAR drove up to the house as Bill and Martha joined Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer on the veranda.

With the instinct of that true and delightful hospitality that is so essentially American the Old Rip and the white-haired lady hastened with Bill to greet their guest on the threshold.

"Hello, Teddy!"

"Hello, Bill."

Jedburgh gave a fleeting but appreciative glance at the old house before getting out of the car. Having come straight from his work on the British Mission he was in uniform, and ugly as its color was it was well cut and well ironed. In any clothes he was the sort of man who held the eye because of his height and slightness and a rather rare grace that suggested a reincarnation from the white wig period.

"Mother," said Bill, "let me introduce my friend Major Jedburgh of the Royal Air Force."

"You are very welcome, Major Jedburgh."

Teddy gave her a ceremonial salute and bent over her hand. "You are most kind," he said.

"My father."

"Welcome to my house, Major Jedburgh."

The salute was repeated. "Thank you, Sir."

"You are just in time for tea," said Mrs. Mortimer.

Whereupon recovering his cap, the Major gave his arm to his hostess and led the way to the table,

which was surrounded by chairs. Albery, who had watched all this Elizabethanism with unctuous appreciation, bore down upon the car.

"Miss Wainwright, Major Jedburgh."

This was not a bit like the man that she had expected to see.

"A primrose," thought Teddy, catching his breath. And during the buzz of talk that followed, for some of which he was responsible, he examined Bill's good-looking face with a sort of reluctant eagerness. Was it with this slice of spring that he was going to build a church out of the ruins of his past? . . . Some men had all the luck. He caught on again in time to say "I remember very well" to the old man's statement that they had met before, years ago, at a hunt breakfast at his father's place in Leicestershire. He had clean forgotten the incident. He must have been six at the time.

"Your mother dined with me in London during the Coronation season," said Mrs. Mortimer. "I shall never forget her beauty. I hope that she is well."

"She is dead," said Teddy. "But I hope so too."

The disconcerted murmur was relieved by the pontifical presence of Albery, with a plate of hot muffins.

And during all this Martha had watched and made notes. . . . She could n't see this man, with the poet's forehead and the eyes of a humanitarian, leading a squadron of death birds to drop bombs on enemy troop trains, and dive out of the clouds, with

roaring engines, to give battle to a flock of Huns. She looked at the long line of ribbons on his coat, and the wound and service stripes on his sleeve. But it was the lines round his eyes that told the tale. . . . Somehow he made the war that was supposed to have ceased stand out with peculiar crudity as the most gigantic paradox in the history of crime. . . . She could see him playing with children under old trees and sitting with a smile on his lips in a house of peace. He had killed and offered himself to death for the protection of the young and the old, — the pawn of bad men and poisonous fetishes. But she called it patriotism, not knowing.

The same thought had come to Mrs. Mortimer. And when the Commodore gave her the chance, — the sight of this Englishman had opened up many memories and recollections of mutual friends, — she leaned forward. "Tell me why you, of all men, joined the Flying Corps?"

"It's extraordinary how many people have asked me that," he said, looking at Martha because he had seen that it was her question too. "To answer you properly I'm afraid I'll have to go into the psychology of the two sorts of men who seized the chance of going up into the air. There were only two sorts, as I have made it out, and I think they were pretty equally divided. My sort, to take that first, was made up of men who had been trained to discipline, but who detested the idea of red-tape and the necessary but irritating system of carrying out orders that percolated down through a dozen au-

tomata from the hide-bound and generally unimaginative High Command. We jumped into the Flying Corps in the hope of escaping from the irritation of all that and because we saw in it the one opportunity to free-lance, to use our own initiative and to get out of the daily routine of trench life. We argued that as we were pretty certain to be killed we might as well die for a sheep as a lamb. We exchanged from other branches of the service at the earliest possible moment and made a scientific study of the new art as a sort of mental refreshment. Don't imagine that the danger or the so-called romance appealed to us. None of us wanted to commit suicide or die before our time. What we did want was a certain independence of action, and the brief possession of our own souls between quick bursts of duty. Some of us were poets, some fathers, and nearly all of us loathed war and the politicians. The other sort was composed of very young men, almost boys, who had not only never been trained to discipline but who had deliberately gone out of their way to ignore all forms of law and order, who broke speed limits for the sheer joy and mischief of the thing and who were never likely to find themselves on earth. To these fellows, careless and gallant, and wholly imbued with the spirit of adventure, the air was a new and appropriate element, devoid of policemen, magistrates, Dons, Stop and Go signs, and all the rest of the excrescences of civilization, as they regarded them. They held their lives on a thin string and although they

did n't enjoy killing there grew up in them the spirit of competition which made the downing of enemy planes the essence of the game. They came to the Flying Corps like homing pigeons certain of finding kindred spirits, and they lived in a continual chaos of practical joking and larkiness into which no seriousness was ever permitted to put its foot for more than ten seconds. Whether any of them found themselves in the air I don't know. I think they had to die for that. And they did die, in the great winnowing of youth, in shoals, but there seemed to be an unlimited number to take their places. The ones who came out alive are dancing now and back at their old tricks with added zest. The dead ones are finding out what it is to be understood for the first time and are very happy, according to themselves."

He gave a little laugh and a gesture of apology for having monopolized the conversation. There was a complete silence.

The two old people, to whom the last sentence opened up an amazing possibility, gazed with a great wistfulness at the quiet graceful man who seemed to have looked at life and death from a higher altitude than that of their own, and each made a mental note of an eager desire to get him alone for further questioning.

Martha had begun to listen to all this with keen interest, held by Jedburgh's eyes, but when, because of his characteristic courtesy, he turned from one to the other of his listeners, she seized the oppor-

tunity to watch Bill who sat looking at his friend with a sort of school-boy pride. And as she did so only the smooth sound of the English voice came to her. She lost the meaning of the words under a sudden fever of love, an agony of isolation. . . . Bill wanted to "plant roots and settle down and take a wife and all that." It was going to be mighty difficult to find a girl — *the* girl. Which proved that during the whole of that month he had been looking through her and searching. It made her miserable beyond words, and angry too and humiliated. If she had known enough to have tumbled to the idea that she was being deliberately left alone with Bill, brought forward for his consideration, she would have bolted and disappeared, or, more probably, being necessary at home, flared out into a little burst of redhot words and told Bill to go and look for this girl and not waste his time on her. And if, knowing everything, the whole selfish scheme, she were asked by Bill to be his wife and were not supremely satisfied that he asked for love, she would, though wholly his, consign him to the devil in the honest Wainwright English picked up from her father. That was the Martha who was just beginning to be discovered by the white-haired lady, to her surprise and dismay.

Everything had slipped into a pretty hopeless mess because conscience and a lack of confidence had been added to Bill's other difficulties in dealing with Miss Respectable.

V

THE one good thing about uniform was that it saved a man from the fag of changing for dinner.

But Bill dressed quickly. Martha had gone home, but was to return with Tom Wainwright to dine. It was Mrs. Mortimer's idea to have a little party for Teddy Jedburgh. So she said. Her real wish was to keep Bill and the child as much as possible together. The Commodore had given her his *bonne bouche* and her hopes ran high again. If Bill continued to hang back much longer she would give him the necessary courage to propose by telling him what she knew of Martha's feelings. But this must be, she argued, her last card, her great desire being to keep as much romance in her scheme as she could. Her conscience pricked sometimes, too.

Martha had refused hitherto to leave her father in the evening. It so happened that this was the night of an annual banquet of bankers in town. And so she could get away,—mother having to keep to her room still.

Jedburgh was sitting at the open window of his bedroom when Bill went in. He was reading a thin book of poems and smoking. One long leg was crossed over the other and that faint indefinable smile was playing round his lips.

"Good for you, old thing," he said. "What's the news?"

"Nothing here. What's yours?"

"Well, a certain amount of quiet work with those very excellent fellows in Whitehall Street, a thorough exploration by day of the obvious parts of New York, the amazing city, and some rather disturbing evenings at your very nice apartment with Jeanne Dacoral, Birdie Carroll and Susie Hatch, especially Susie Hatch."

"How do you mean, — disturbing?"

"Well, one or other of them, sometimes two and once or twice all three, have come up most nights in the hope of seeing you. Don't imagine for a moment, my dear chap, that I use the word disturbing in a personal sense. I like them, especially Susie Hatch. And Jeanne is a dear little soul who makes the piano speak her thoughts. And Birdie Carroll, with her round face and her urgent need of seeds and sugar, lives up to her name, except that thank Heaven she does n't carol."

Bill laughed. "You're right," he said. "She's in musical comedy."

Teddy Jedburgh marked the point with one of his airy waves of the hand. It was n't a Latin gesture. It was Oxford.

"What I mean is, they're worried about you, old thing."

"Me? Why?"

"Well, where are you? That's the question they keep asking. 'Where's Bill, and what the hell's he playing at? What's come over the man? We want him. How much longer is he going to keep up this old-home week? Has he turned good and

gone into hair shirts? Is he shaking us', — admirable expression, — 'and left you behind to let us down easy?' "

Bill worried his brush-like mustache. "Um . . . I see. You must have cursed those rooms a bit. I'm darned sorry, Teddy."

"No, no, no, really. They're the only home I've got, and your young friends have protected me from an overwhelming loneliness. Of course I said nothing about your — what did you call it? — orgy of reconstruction and all that. I had n't your permission. I knew nothing except that you wanted naturally to give yourself to your people and so forth and played host. Very instructive. My education has been greatly improved. But in going back to Susie Hatch, Bill, — well, I think you must use imagination and immense sympathy. At once. She would n't open up and show her little soul to me to save herself from torture. You know that. But she's hurt, old son, deeply and badly hurt. You have n't even written her a note since you left town and she's like a flower in a drought."

Bill worried more. "Damn everything," he said, obviously moved. He began to stride about that neat, quaint, very perfect room with its Colonial bed and tall-boy, writing desk and dressing table, all rosy like the face of an old apple woman. . . . The admirable expression to shake could n't be linked on to the word past, it seemed. Not that, with second thoughts, it mattered much. Martha had laughed. But, thinking again, Bill was going

to be a good boy now anyhow, — and how about Susie Hatch, to say nothing of the other wild oats? He had n't, in his absurd ecstasy, made the remotest attempt to cut them down. In cutting Susie there would be blood on his scythe. "Damn everything," he said again, "especially me."

"Yes, but speaking frankly," said Jedburgh, "that does n't achieve much, old thing. I think you ought to see her and let her into your new plans as gently as you can. I would have been glad enough, a few weeks ago, to have taken Susie off your hands, and been very good to her. She could have married me if that would have appealed to her peculiar sense of humor."

"Good Lord," said Bill.

"Why? This is an age of revolutions. I'm nobody. She has youth, — that's the New Aristocracy. But I found that tradition dies hard and ideals have a knack of appearing to be dead with their hearts still beating. I don't want a mere temporary passion that ends in a sordid settlement and a sense of shame. I want love and a home and she can't give me these. Neither can I give them to her, much as I like her. So I'm still on the lookout, but with my feet too deeply planted in old dreams to be satisfied with the sort of philandering that I discussed with you. Mental shell shock has lifted a bit, you see. Things have become difficult as a result."

"I'll go up and see her to-morrow," said Bill.

And then Jedburgh put the question that had been

in his mind since the moment that he had caught sight of the primrose. A flower of a girl with the dew on her and a morning hymn in her eyes. That description fitted her like a glove. Was she to be asked to follow after Jeanne Dacoral, Birdie Carroll and Susie Hatch, — especially Susie Hatch? And the others? He was Bill's friend. He understood the need of the man with the pathetic eagerness to turn over a new leaf. All the same

"Tell me about Miss Wainwright, Bill."

"There is n't anything to tell, Teddy. You see what she is, and how exactly she fits into the niche where I would put her. I've spent a month trying to make her like me, but it's not coming out right. She laughed this afternoon when I roughed out my idea. As you say, youth's the New Aristocracy. Without any of your traditions I'm on the lookout too. Reconstruction is n't so derved easy as it seemed."

And Jedburgh inwardly confessed to a reluctant sense of relief. The primrose deserved better than to have a Blue Room in her house. Youth to Youth, — it was the old good story.

"Better luck, Bill," he said.

It was the same old world to which they had both come back.

VI

THE wine cellars were well stocked in the Mortimer House. Teddy Jedburgh and Tom Wainwright paid proper tribute to the Veuve Clicquot '09 and the

priceless Napoleon brandy. The only satisfaction Barclay Mortimer got out of it was in watching the enjoyment of his guests. To his eloquently expressed regret his drink was barley water, — “ghastly stuff, my dear Major, as joyless as a rainy day.”

As soon as the men left the dining table for the drawing room, never dreaming that even at that moment certain sly fanatics were at work with bribes and blackmail to put the country under the heel of a law that would sweep away the effects of education and self-discipline because the vast minority forgot both, Bill shut himself up with the telephone. As good as his word, he was going to make an appointment to see Susie Hatch in the morning. He hated the idea of her being hurt, although he did n't see what he could do to make things any better. He knew Susie.

Mrs. Mortimer's high spirits were contagious. The Commodore, wearing again the ribbon of the *Légion d'Honneur*, was in his best mood. His stories were delightful, and told with more economy of detail than usual. They were new to Jedburgh and Tom Wainwright and went well. The only thing new in them to the white-haired lady and Bill was the way in which they were sprung. But they both laughed at the right moment with more loyalty than is generally shown by members of much tried families to the chestnuts of the heads of them. With a sense of appreciation in which there were both humor and pathos the old boy thanked them

for this as soon as he could. His manners were of the old ripe school.

Tom took the place on the sofa by Mrs. Mortimer, so Jedburgh availed himself of the chance to lean over the piano and get a few words with Martha, who had been playing. She had a pretty touch.

"You must be very proud of your brother," he said.

Martha's smile was exactly what he hoped to see. It added to his feeling of "not belonging," though, — to an infinite loneliness. "We are," she said.

"I came over on the same ship. His eagerness to get back added a beat a minute to the engines. A born soldier, as he showed by his imaginative treatment of his men. He ought to sacrifice his career and stay in your army. He'll be needed again sooner or later."

"You don't believe in the League of Nations then?"

Jedburgh waved his hand. "Human nature can't be altered by a set of rules, nor can the millennium be achieved on this planet by anything that we can do. 'A Man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a Heaven for?'"

"That's an awful thing to say to women."

"Why to women?"

"We have to stay at home and eat our hearts out."

"If you did n't it is doubtful if there'd be any men to come back to you."

She got up so that her face should be out of the spread of light. This man could easily read her secret, she felt.

"Don't go," said Jedburgh. "Sit here and I'll play you the story of this war, — I mean if you'd care to hear it."

Martha sat down and leaned forward. Play and fight, and read secrets, — what else could he do?

Jedburgh drew up to the piano and held his hands over the keys for a moment.

They came down with a crash of discords. The Old Rip nearly jumped out of his shirt. It was followed by a great burst of drums and bugles, a medley of the *Wacht am Rhein*, the *Marseillaise* and the *Brabançonne*, and after a moment of chaos and indecision of *God Save the King*. Then the music swelled into a broad tremendous swing with an undercurrent of running feet, children's whimpers, women's urgings and the pathetic grumbling of old people, the explosion of guns, queer laughter, piercing screams, the rumble of retreating wagons and the faint persistent singing of "Tipperary," "Old yer 'and out, naughty boy," and the Russian National anthem. There was a scrambling of high notes, rush, ecstasy, effort, a deep booming in the bass, strong, dull and death dealing, and in it all the wail and stumble of crowds hurrying. Then a series of melodies, sometimes sweet and cathedral-like, sometimes grossly banal and of the music-hall and the café, sometimes all queer and out of time, then drab and in the minor and always with the old

boom and shatter. Sometimes an ecstatic burst of the Marseillaise would sweep out again, urging and appealing, running into Tipperary with little flares of the Brabançonne and the distant suggestion of Russian music, the hoarse roar of the Wacht am Rhein, renewed monotony and through it all boy-laughter and the tang of wires against the wind. And again the dull and banal and the monotonous with the steady boom and shatter, edging sometimes on the satiric but never again touching the ecstatic or the religious and with no suggestion of the anthems of the nations except for a quick break into that of Italy. And so it went on, with a brief clang of quarrels, mutinies, lunatic cries, stern orders, grim steadyings, an undercurrent of syncope and the swirl of dancing feet. Airs that began as hymns ended as fox-trots, — the boom and the shatter prevailing. And then came a new and curious twist of angry protest at once subdued, of cynicism and argument, which was drowned by the clatter of kettle-drums, the splitting of air bombs, the tang of wires, women's moaning, the glib chatter of politicians and falling rain. Monotony, monotony, tinged with yet another new thing, — atheism, but still the same old boom and shatter. And then, suddenly, panic, chaos, unholy fear, an onward rush, jeers and laughter and yells, the utter disappearance of jazz, once more the organ notes in terrified appeal, the awful nearness of the boom and shatter, the blare of the Star-Spangled Banner, a change into another medley of national

melodies, the gradual fading of the roar of guns — and silence. But only for the edge of a moment. Jazz came again, jazz, loud and persistent, jazz and the swirl of dancing feet and women's laughter, the moaning of great ships and cripples, the idiotic jabber of political voices, the hoarse triumph of Bolsheviki, the satirical questioning of atheists with pens, the swirl of dancing feet. . . .

"Good God," gasped Barclay Mortimer, drawing two fingers across a wet forehead.

But Teddy Jedburgh did n't leave the piano. He sat with his hands on his knees, pale, and looking through things with that faint indefinable smile on his lips. Presently his hands touched the notes again and out into the room floated the sound of "Should auld acquaintance be forgot —"

But he stopped abruptly in the middle of a bar because Martha burst out crying and ran into the moonlight.

VII

MRS. MORTIMER would have given a great deal for Bill to have been in the room when this happened. At a sign from her he would have followed Martha out. A woman's crying, according to her experience, had one of two different effects on a man in love. Both caused him to lose his head, but one made him curse and the other gave him courage to take her in his arms. She would have gambled on the latter. But he was trying, at the moment, to persuade a telephone operator to get the number

that he required instead of the one she considered that he ought to have, and the great opportunity passed. A chat with a blind beggar on his way to the House of Commons once brought about the downfall of a Prime Minister.

And so Barclay Mortimer performed the act of consolation in his best manner. He was a master of the art. His dear Italian had often wept for no apparent reason and the little lady who had hunted Beauty Boy had had a most disconcerting way of bursting into tears at the most inconvenient moments. It was, and always will be, woman's rudimentary method of claiming the undivided attention and the reassurance of love that she needs so often.

Martha was laughing when she was escorted back to the drawing room. She said that she had cried for all the boys who had been killed. She was obliged to offer some excuse. But she knew, and Mrs. Mortimer guessed, that she had suddenly lost her self-control, under the effect of Jedburgh's impressionistic sketch, as the logical outcome of a month of many emotions.

The evening ended early because Martha had issued solemn warnings as to the Mortimer habits. The alacrity with which the Commodore sprang to his feet when Tom made the first tentative move confirmed his sister's knowledge. Denham had already been waiting for fifteen minutes with all his paraphernalia.

Bill and Teddy walked as far as the brook. It

was a very perfect June night, still and warm, and so white and clear that the trees threw shadows and some of the daisies had forgotten to close their eyes. A full moon occupied her cold impersonal place among the uncountable lights of the islands of the sky. Bill's soul had not been in the habit of bothering him on his easy way through life. But that night, for reasons that had been piling up recently, he felt a longing to stand on some high place and look down upon the earth, — to take a glance back and to gaze into the future. And what better companion could he have on this brief excursion than the ex-flying man whose feet were planted deeply in old dreams, and whose ideals had not, after all, been left among the mud and bones of Flanders. And so he led the way up to the Hill of the Seven Sisters and sat down with Teddy on the bench which had been the prie-dieu of his mother and his girl.

Away below, all lucent under the white light of the moon, lay that great stretch of peaceful country, a panorama of slanting valley and sleeping trees, of small villages winking a few tired eyes, a wide lake glistening like a looking glass, and a range of hills in the distance that made a rolling smudge against the sky.

"Oh, my God!" he said involuntarily.

And Teddy nodded. "A cathedral, roofless, echoing with the passing feet of worshipers, and the song of understanding of the survivors of death."

And after a long pause Bill began to talk. "I wish I'd come across you before, when I was a bit of a boy."

"Why?"

"There's a lot of stuff in you that I've never known about. I have traditions, — you've seen the walls to-night. But somehow, Teddy, I never caught their meaning. You caught the meaning of yours and you might have explained them to me to soak into my imagination. There's just a chance that I should n't have had to feel so cursed sick of myself as I do to-night, — and have done since I began to think."

"Maybe," said Jedburgh. "What I call tradition led me through school and college with a pretty firm hand. But when I came over here, homeless and with the dust in my eyes that rose up from the débris of the old order of things, I regretted that I had been so much a prig as to have missed the human links that you have made. There is n't a living creature to catch a signal from me, — no Susie Hatch to light up my rooms with a blaze of love. There are no memories in my isolation, Bill. And what after all has my tradition done for me?"

"Left you without a Blue Room, old son."

"But is n't it better to have a Blue Room than no rooms at all?"

"No. You can build a new house and leave all the doors unlocked."

"That's true. . . . The past has an ugly knack of running ahead of the present and turning round

to grin. Quaint thing that we have come out at the same place by such different paths."

Bill heaved a sigh that seemed to come up from his boots. "Well," he said, "I don't know which way to go, now that I'm here."

"Neither do I," said Jedburgh. Loyalty to his friend put up a huge wall in front of a picture that had been filling his eye persistently all the evening, — the primrose in a garden that he had made. There was something quite devilishly ironical in the fact that in Martha who was loved by Bill he had found the one girl who had done strange things to his heart.

"Let's go home," said Bill.

It was an enviable home in spite of its Blue Room. The first that Jedburgh had known since the war began its demolishment. They went down together, leaving the Seven Sisters to gossip about the things to which they had just listened. "Are you going up to see Susie Hatch to-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bill. "She's coming to my room for lunch."

What he called tradition urged Teddy to play the straight game. "Don't go back on your tracks, Bill. You know those lines about rising on stepping stones. Give yourself another chance with Martha. If you have the luck to make her love you you can board up that old Blue Room of yours. It's been done before."

"If I could make her love me I'd never give her time to pry about. I'd make every other room too

attractive. But it is n't on the cards, Teddy. She laughed this afternoon."

"Never mind. Do nothing to-morrow to make reconstruction impossible. You were born under a good star."

"You advise that?"

"I do. And then come back and go to work again. The odds are all in your favor". . . He was no poacher. Nor had the utter demoralization that followed war changed his ideas of friendship. His feet were deeply planted in old dreams and he could n't pull them out. Only if Bill failed would he scramble up and climb over that infernally high wall. It would be fairer than to try and win this primrose for himself.

VIII

THERE was precious little conceit about Bill. The usual amount of egotism, of course, — the desire for comfort and the incurable habit of believing that the world revolved around himself, — without which nature would not be human, but none of the preening sense of being indispensable that goes with women's men. Bill was not a woman's man. He was an outdoor man who liked to see a woman in his house when it was necessary to go in. It was in the winter that he had mostly been caught. Women meant more to him, therefore, than to one whose only hobby was to pursue, and if he had analyzed his state of mind during his bad weather interludes, — a thing he never did, — he would have

assured himself that he had been the one who had been hit, though not very hard. He had been accepted, he had always considered, for the good things that he had gone out of his way to give and afterwards had continued to be looked up from time to time because relations had warmed into friendship. Jeanne Dacoral, Birdie Carroll and the others, — dear little souls, — had gone on with light hearts to other interests. He had delighted in seeing them whenever they had had nothing better to do and had taken a keen pleasure in proving his gratitude whenever they had thrown out a hint, — often before. His hand went to his pocket without an effort.

But the case of Susie Hatch was different, and this he knew. She was n't a City bred child, born sophisticated, who realized the asset of sex as a perfectly natural thing, and never allowed herself to take her lucky strikes too seriously. She was a sea-flower, born during the drive of a storm to the cantata of tumultuous seas and catastrophic winds. Her heart had been blown clean by salt breezes and her soul filled with faithfulness by the wonder of the skies. She had watched the faint horizon for the ship of her dreams, had recognized its lines in the yacht that Bill had owned and known in Bill her master and mate. He had given her life and affection in return for the loyalty and devotion of a stray dog. She belonged to him, had cleaved to him, like ivy to a wall. If he threw her back into the sea she might have forgotten how to swim. If

he cut her down among his wild oats there would be blood on the scythe. . . .

Difficult? Good Lord, yes. He did n't love her and he did love Martha, and even if he had loved her could he take her home to those two fastidious people who were thinking of his wife as the mother of his race?

The car landed him at his apartment twenty minutes too early for his appointment. But when he let himself in she was kneeling on the window seat with the sun in her hair, as lonely as a sea gull perched on an isolated rock. "Use imagination and immense sympathy," Teddy had said. "She's hurt, old son, deeply and badly hurt." If he let her into his plans, however gently, what would she do? About any other girl he would have used the word 'say'.

"Hello, Susie!"

The color rushed into her face as she wheeled round. It was a thin face, he noticed with a qualm, with eyes that told of sleepless nights. But the veneer of self-assurance and almost insolent coolness behind which she had found it necessary to hide was instantly assumed from force of habit. In all cities there are men among whom the unprotected girl must stand in armor. Bill had been away for a month and had never written a line.

"I did n't believe you'd come," she said.

How she reminded him of Martha by the angle of her chin. "Have I ever been late before?"

"Before's so long ago I almost forget." But she

went closer, step by step, like a child who loved in spite of punishment, and put her face against his heart. After all it might only have been his people who had kept him away, and he hated writing letters.

Bill was at an utter loss for words. From his point of view and that of his father and mother excuses were only to be made as a matter of form. He had no remote idea of getting out of his responsibilities towards this girl, and it was his plan to double the income that was paid to her by his lawyers. From her point of view, as he could see, he had been cruel and neglectful and she ached to hear that he was sorry. Anyone less soft-hearted than Bill would have been able to deal with the situation without blundering, in a perfectly matter-of-fact way. Conditions had changed. New plans had to be made. Lawyers had been instructed on the question of money. Good memories would always remain and friendly relations continue, with due care for the conventions,—and that sort of thing. . . . Not so Bill. He had tried to rehearse the gist of all this on his way to the City and had succeeded in putting together a sort of statement in which the sordid and the cold-blooded were altogether absent. But the sight and the touch of this sea-child confused him and put him in the wrong and sent all his sentences into a muddle of letters.

“Damn the war,” he said, with not so much irrelevancy as one might think.

And she jumped at it as the thing that was wholly

to blame, and held up her face as she had done the day of her discovery as a stowaway.

Bill was going to be a good boy now, according to himself, — but he kissed her, and she was happy and forgave. All the black thoughts that had come to her in sleepless nights lifted and disappeared. Bill had come back. Everything was good once more.

“Come and sit down and tell me everything,” she said, and ran him to the big settee, plumped him into it and curled up at his side with her arms round his neck.

How on earth was he to do this thing? Reconstruction? It was easier said than done with Miss Respectable on one side and Susie Hatch on the other. “I wish to God I loved you,” he said to himself, looking into the girl’s devoted eyes. “I’d take you home whatever they said and there’d be no Blue Room there for you, my dear.”

She read it as she wished to read it and snuggled closer. Good times had come again.

“Your father and mother have made a great fuss of you, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Of course they have. And it was just you, Bill, to give them all these weeks. And now the ‘Iolanthe’ and the wind and salt and me. Is that the scheme? I’m starving for the lap of water and the mewing of gulls and you.”

Good God!

“Don’t let’s take Teddy Jedburgh. I like him,

— he's a fairy tale, but let's go off alone. Let's go back to the old places and pretend the war was a nightmare. I have n't been tanned for years."

"I've sold the 'Iolanthe,' " said Bill.

"What? . . . Well, buy another. There are lots to be had. It's June, Bill, and the sun's warming up."

"It can't be done, Susie."

"Oh Bill! . . . Well then, find a cottage all by itself on the dunes and let's be sand boys. Nothing matters but the sea and you."

The thing had to be faced. "Would it be the same, or something like it, if you took Jeanne or Birdie, — or anyone else instead? . . ."

Her laugh rang through the room, went flying out of the window and was caught in the breeze that carried it away over the Plaza. "How you love to tease me, don't you?" she said, tightening her clasp.

That cursed scythe. How he detested to have to use it. "No, I'm dead serious," he went on, like a bull in a china shop. "You've got to count me out, Susie."

She put her head back so that she could examine his face. "I don't get you," she said, her smile going out. She began to look thin again.

"I don't see why you should. I'm no good at things like this. It's not in my line. But if I could begin to tell you of the sort of mood I came back and went home with, knowing that I've played about long enough, and then finding my father and

mother pretty old, Susie, and mighty keen for me to cut bachelor stuff and settle down and take a wife . . .”

She withdrew herself, slowly and coldly, and stood with her foot on the bear's head and her back to the empty firegrate. Behind the armor into which she had dived again her young body was all bruised by this blow. “Don't worry about all the rest of it,” she said. “I can guess, Bill. Why didn't you write it? It would have saved you coming up and having to stumble it all out.” She was n't sarcastic. She was perfectly cool and self-assured, — even kind in a desire to help him.

Bill was a little shocked. “Don't you care?” he asked, getting up.

She heard the sea calling like a mother. Born in its tumult and catastrophe she must go back to it for peace. “Yes, Bill,” she said.

“And do you understand? Do you see the thing that I've got to do? Marriage and children and responsibility and all that?”

“Yes, Bill,” she said.

He went up to her and put his hands on her shoulders. She was so quiet, — there was such a queer look in her eyes. . . . “What are you thinking about?”

“You,” she said, “and what you've got to do. Good luck, Bill.”

“You'll go on with your work in the studio and when the right man” —

She shook her head. "It's good-by to the right man."

Emotion surged over him. This water-babe who had given him the love of a wife. . . . Oh, curse it! How sorry he was. He wished to God that he loved her. "Why good-by? Shan't you let me see you sometimes?"

She shook her head again, but her mask fell for a second.

On the thin face, that was as white as foam, he saw that queer look that had struck fear into him before. There was more in this than being honest and drawing blood. There was the sea in her eyes. If he did n't work on every shred of her devotion his Blue Room would contain a slight dead figure washed up by the tide.

He caught her in his arms. "Not that, Susie. You would n't punish me all the rest of my life by doing a thing like that. There's the family to consider and what I've brought out of the War. I wish like hell I'd never been in it and was all alone in the world. It would all be easy then. But things have got to go this way and *you* won't be the one — oh Susie, not you — to put the stain of your blood on my soul."

She looked up into his face, not quite the same face that she had seen from the sea, and saw that his lips were trembling and his eyes full of the sort of appeal that there must once have been in hers, that time when she had begged for life and love out on the yacht. And a great pity came — he wanted

the right girl — she was n't the right girl — and children, and she stood on tiptoe, flung her arms round his neck and kissed him.

Itoto slipped in to lay the table, — and they walked over to the window.

“What you gave me I give you,” she said. “Life. Make the most of it. And to prove that you've made me master the old sea-feeling I'll not listen to the call. I'll be an artist instead and paint the love of you into my pictures. You may trust me.”

Poor, old Bill. He did n't know what to do or say to thank her. He was n't a woman's man. But his inarticulation was understood by Susie. Ivy knows the oak and she knew Bill. . . . Would anyone else ever know him so well?

IX

ALBERY was taking a nap on the veranda when Bill got back that afternoon. With a bandana handkerchief over his face to keep the flies away, the pompous person who had made a vocation of butlership was enjoying what he considered to be a very honestly earned rest. He justified his use of the Commodore's chair on the part of the veranda that was sacred to tea by the fact that his faithfulness had made him almost a member of the family, — or at any rate the sort of member who came into the open when the family was out. His feet, with boots laced only halfway up, and pointing east and west, had been placed on another chair. The massive recumbent figure, with hands clasped upon the

central mountain, and clad in garments of excessive excellence, could not be a thing of beauty, but it was, and would always scrupulously remain, the symbol of service.

But Bill wanted to know something and wanted to know it quickly. All the way home he had put himself up as the champion cad of the world and chucked great lumps of rock at his body. He was feeling both bashed and impatient. He stamped about like a fussy man shaking snow from his boots. A long and luscious snore issued. He drew a wicker table up and down twice, thereby making the sort of squeak that jerks the fillings out of teeth. Nothing happened. There was obviously only one thing left to do. He did it. A resounding bump, a roar of oaths, a slow but dignified rise. . . . "Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon. Where's everybody?"

"Madam has driven over to the nurseries, sir, to see about those Japanese maples."

"Well?"

"John is driving the Commodore and Lord Edward in the opposite direction, sir, to take a look at the country."

"Not Lord Edward. Major Jedburgh. He wishes it."

Albery's eyebrows rose slightly and with them went his shoulders and then his hands. "Very good, sir. But can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?"

"What's to stop him?" said Bill. "It's a free

country. . . Where 's Marth — I mean Miss Wain — oh, it does n't matter." The screen door came back with a whang behind him and he stamped upstairs to his rooms. It 's curious how a man feels impelled to make a tremendous noise after undergoing a bout of mental humiliation. Reaction brings with it, probably, a sort of " Now then, who the devil says that I 'm taking this lying down. Hear me about unless you 're deaf, can't you? "

" H'm," said Albergy to himself, as he replaced the furniture with minute accuracy, " Bill 's bumped up against a bit of the past to-day, that 's certain. Don't I know the feeling? " A little smile fluttered over his face.

Bill got out of his clothes and stood under a cold shower until every suggestion of the City was washed away. Then he dried his hair to re-wet it with a stinging hair-juice, and got into a pair of loose knickerbockers, a soft shirt with a small low collar, an easy coat and shoes a size too large. His mind could become even more hopelessly disorganized if his body were completely comfortable. . . . Susie loved him. Martha did n't. He did n't love Susie and he did love Martha. He was wretched, he 'd had to make Susie wretched and if he could make Martha wretched that would be fine, — that is, — oh curse. . . . And having made Susie desperately unhappy and dashed her hopes and put bad thoughts into her mind, to say nothing of having made himself an infernal cad by his clumsy way of breaking things up and hinting at class differences

and that stuff, — if he had loved her would *that* have mattered? — What he asked himself now was “Is it worth it? Is n’t this reconstruction business nothing but a dream? Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? They’re not wild oats that I planted. They’re mustard seed. Cut ’em down, burn ’em out and up they come again. Susie is just as much mine now as ever she was. I took her and she’s permanent. No Blue Room can shut her in. She’s alive and about and will have to be watched. No one could keep her word better, but will painting do the trick? . . . Martha laughs. That’s over. I cling to this pathetic idea of beginning again and playing up to mother and the old Dad and the traditions and start on the hunt for Miss Respectable. If I find her, or Mother produces her, and she’s fool enough to take me on there’s Martha stuck in my heart. . . . It’s no good. I must chuck it. The whole damned thing is n’t honest. I can’t reconstruct. I’ve missed the chance of playing the game. Bill just can’t be a good boy now and that’s all there is to it.”

But when he wandered out and kicked himself from one lonely place to another, more depressed than ever because there was n’t a soul to make as wretched as he was, he thought suddenly of the bench beneath the Seven Sisters which was Martha’s favorite place, perked up at once and went off in long strides to see what he could do in that direction. She might laugh at him, and she was perfectly justified. But perhaps there was something that he

could say, with any luck, to give his depression to her.

Yes, there was Martha. The primrose, as Teddy called her. He was good at exact descriptions. But she was n't sitting on the bench as he had seen her so often, apparently waiting for something, as it had vaguely seemed to him. She was standing clear cut against the sky on the edge of the hill, straight, slight and gloriously young, without a hat, her hands clasped behind her back. She might have been throwing out a speech to the listening valley with words of scorn and impatience about Life. It was not a bit of good to her and she didn't care who knew it.

She heard him coming but made no move. Her heart jumped. That was all. He left the shade of the Seven Sisters and went out into the sun by her side. There they stood, with the world at their feet, silently.

She had been thinking too, and was angry. Why was he hanging about the garden and the hill and fastening himself on her, when all the while his thoughts were far afield, searching. Pride did n't permit any more of this humiliation. It must be brought to an end. "Well," she said, looking out at the procession of hills away in the distance. "Have you been to town to find a girl,—*the* girl?"

"I don't have to go to town to do that," he said sharply. A nice lookout when she began to rot him right away.

She turned, as cool as a fish, and ran her eyes over

him. Good Lord, how she reminded him of Susie Hatch by the angle of her chin. "Is that so? It's none of my business, but you can't be said to show much keenness to see her, can you, — never leaving this place?"

He hurled the ball back. "Why should I leave this place? *She* does n't."

The lurking smile went out of her eyes. What did he mean? There was no girl, no other girl. . . . And then all the fog that had come between them lifted and in the golden clearness of that afternoon she saw the man she loved and hungered for in all his humbleness and lack of courage. The air was filled with the rustling of wings and over the sinking sun the star came forth. . . . It was for her to make him speak, and the woman in her reveled in the chance. He should pay a little for all her hours of anguish.

"Perhaps she only comes out at night, like the moon?"

"Don't let's talk about it," he said. "It won't do any good."

He was n't to be allowed to get away like that. "But you mystify me," she said. "Only yesterday you asked who was to take you seriously and talked about the difficulty of finding the girl. And now you say she's here. What exactly do you mean?"

Instead of infecting her with his depression he had made her gay, it seemed. Something had set her alight. She looked taller and behind the laugh in her eyes there were burning fires. He had never

seen her look like that or felt so strongly the vitality of her youth.

All right. He would tell her and the thing would be ended. His fatuous scheme of reconstruction would fall like an empty shell. "I mean what I say," he said, smarting under her levity. "She *is* here. She was here when I went away. She was here when I came back. I loved her when she came up to this hill. I've loved her more and more ever since. But she does n't give a single curse about me and that ends it. I wanted to settle down and plant roots and take a wife but as she won't have me I'm homeless and the thing's a dream." He turned away like a boy.

And she put her hand on his arm and turned him back. "How do you know it's a dream? How do you know she does n't give a single curse if you have n't spoken to her?"

He stared in amazement.

And she threw out her arms with her face held up. He loved her as she insisted on being loved. Pride was n't in this. "Speak, speak," she cried out, stamping her foot. "Why waste this precious time?"

One more blundering pause, — and then the cry, and the meeting of lips, and the welding of hearts. . . .

Honesty? The hidden key of the Blue Room? Bosh! She loved him. She loved him. What had happened till then was his. What was to happen from that hour onward was hers, — everything.

PART V

I

AT ten o'clock that night Bill Mortimer stalked into the drawing-room of the old house.

To the white-haired lady, the Old Rip and the British Major who had been waiting for him without impatience, he looked rather like a sheepish boy. He was still wearing the clothes into which he had changed that afternoon. His dark crisp hair seemed still to have in it the breeze of a three hours' exultant drive in an open car. His eyes were sparkling, and round his mouth there was the smile that is only to be found on the face of a mere lad who has just kissed his first sweetheart.

In no mood for anything so prosaic as to sit down to dinner he had almost taken a flying header from the hill of the Seven Sisters as soon as Martha had torn herself away; left a message with Albery that he would be back before ten and driven himself about the surrounding country with a total and reckless disregard for speed limits, — going almost indeed as fast as his thoughts. Only by the luck of lovers and drunkards had he escaped arrest and

accident. And now, here he was, with his head in the clouds and his feet nowhere near the earth, to break the momentous news to his family of his engagement to Martha.

The whole fun of the thing lay in the fact that, unknown to the ecstatic Bill, the family and Teddy Jedburgh knew precisely what he had come to tell them. It had happened that Mrs. Mortimer, on her return from the Nurseries, had climbed the hill and seen Martha in Bill's arms, making a picture up there against the sunset which had filled her with indescribable joy. She had crept away, performed a feat of self-restraint unique in the history of women by bottling up her news until dinner was over and then sprung it upon the Commodore and Bill's pal in the seclusion of the drawing-room. It must have been a sight to see the effect of it on the Old Rip. Regardless of corsets and forgetful of gout the ancient but elegant roysterer had sprung to his feet and executed a delirious pas-seul in the middle of the room. He had danced until his breath had given out. He had then skidded on one of the rugs and, before he could be caught by Jedburgh, had measured his length on the floor with the latter half of his body well under a china cabinet. It was one of those horribly comic incidents which draw a scream of laughter but leave a sense of consternation. Finally, peace restored, and the recovery assisted by a nip of rare old brandy, the two excited conspirators had taken Jedburgh into their confidence and had laid all the details of their little

plot bare before him. He had listened to the story of their one remaining ambition with mixed feelings, because Martha was the only girl who had done strange things to his heart. Homeless himself, but with the home feeling strong upon him, his sympathies were all with the old people and Bill, who had achieved, as usual, whatever luck was going. In his characteristically generous and loyal way he rejoiced in Bill's success and refused to allow himself to look through the narrow window in his high wall at a long vista of lonely years.

Mrs. Mortimer, so happy that the abominable ravages of time had faded temporarily from her face, had taken charge. "Now, Barclay," she had said, "keep up the good work, my dear. I am proud of the masterly way in which you have stood aloof all this month. When Bill comes in continue to know nothing. Let him go on believing that Martha is his own discovery and that we have had nothing to do with this matrimonial scheme. Do everything you can to preserve the bloom of this romance of his, which means so much to the poor old boy. We will all profess the surprise and delight that he will expect us to show, although not, perhaps, to the extent of indulging in another imitation of Nejin-sky. That's a little too expensive."

"You're right, my love," the Commodore had replied, laying a rueful hand on the small of his back. "You shall see me act instead. I will give you a dash of Guitry, Hawtrey, and Henry Miller. I never conceived the possibility of Bill's taking

himself so seriously. It's exactly what we want, of course, but is it war, middle thirties, or what?"

"All three, and a combination of several other reactions, and all of them have played into our hands. By the grace of propinquity we may now be able to listen to the lusty cries of a grandchild before we make room for the next occupants."

"By the grace of God," the Old Rip had corrected, with that extreme of reverence that goes with men who take to kneeling only when it does n't matter how much their trousers bag.

Bill caught the three pairs of deliberately incurious eyes, gave his inevitable grin and took his place with his back to the empty fire grate. All about him still were the thrill and passion and surprise and wonder of the moment when he had looked down into the face of that young sweet thing and found her eyes so dark with the depth of her love that he had faltered and stood humble. He had caught her as she had almost fainted with emotion and kissed the color into her cheeks and held her tight so that the fire of his blood should warm her back to life. The scent of her hair clung to him and her little cry still rang in his ears. He did n't try to speak lightly because he knew that what he had come to say meant almost as much to the old people as it meant to himself.

"I'm sorry I could n't join you at dinner," he began.

"Not at all, my dear fellow, not at all," said the

Commodore, catching a yawn. That was his Hawtrey touch.

"We missed you, Bill darling," said the white-haired lady.

"But it gave me the opportunity of blowing a trumpet about your soldiering," put in Jedburgh.

There would have been a short silence but for the raucous chorus of near-by frogs.

"I have something to tell you," said Bill, "that will amaze you all."

"You don't say so," said the Commodore, leaning forward with his hands on his knees in the Guitry manner.

Mrs. Mortimer steadied her voice. "My dear Bill, what *can* it be?"

"Break it to us, old thing," chimed in Jedburgh, playing up.

"Martha and I are engaged to be married," said Bill, coming to it full tilt.

There was a beautiful pause, — the three listeners acting the amazement which Bill was so keen to achieve with a quite professional sense of drama. With a huge effort the Old Rip held himself in to allow his wife the first expression of congratulation. He knew women and was a gallant fellow. Dropping her camouflage the mother rose, fluttered across the room to her big foolish boy, put her arms round his neck and kissed him. The month's suspense and anxiety and impatience had culminated in success. It was a great moment. Unable to trust himself to speak Barclay Mortimer grasped

his son's hands, and turned to his wife. For once he was unable to translate himself into a little flowery speech, but in the deep bow that he gave her all his thanks and admiration were laid at her feet.

Finally Jedburgh went forward. "I'm very glad, old son," he said simply. "I hope you will both know nothing but happiness."

Martha, the primrose, the incarnation of his dreams. . . .

II

ONCE more, these two men who had come out of the shambles of death to make the most of the life which they had been permitted to retain, the one eager to go straight, the other unable to go crooked, sat late.

The irony of the fact that Bill loved and was loved by the girl who alone could have given Jedburgh the home that he pined for was not brought out. All that was an accident, a trick, one of those damnable tangents which Fate delights in turning life into from time to time, just apparently to make things more difficult. Or, perhaps, in order to test character by offering temptation and to strengthen the spirit by giving pain. Who can say? It was n't for Jedburgh to drag in himself and his feelings. In any case Martha was in a preserve into which he had no right to trespass. So he put the primrose into his heart and locked her in.

"If you were the ordinary cove," said Bill, re-

loading his pipe, "you 'd have a fit at all this emotion-stuff."

"Why, my dear old thing?"

They were in the morning room now. It was smaller and less formal than the drawing-room, more in the nature of a den. Few men can get down to things and find anything comfortable to sit on in a drawing-room. To smoke a pipe in such a place, even if it consents to draw there, is as bad as laughing in church.

"Why, it probably would seem that we were making much ado about very little. A man gets engaged to a girl, — it's done every minute of the day. It's one of the popular pastimes, and either leads to a light-hearted marriage that can be broken at will or goes no further than a few kisses, a few presents and a fairly quick awakening. And in any case I suppose lots of people would burst into hoarse laughter at the sight of a house of three worldlings elevating love to a position of supreme importance at a moment when the whole earth is going from bad to worse under the misdirection of the same damn fool politicians whose impotence brought about the war."

"Yes, but for all the laughter of jackasses love is a matter of supreme importance whatever may be the state of the world. The poor old world would very quickly become normal if that point were generally realized. The one great philosopher taught us the simple truth pretty well at the beginning of things and died on the cross to prove it. Don't be-

come self-analytical, Bill. Thank your stars that everything is going well, see that it continues to go well and let the hoarse laughter of cynics blow away like smoke."

Bill got up and began to walk about. "I can't help being self-conscious about all this," he said, with a deep line of worry on his forehead, "because I want things to continue to go well so frightfully much. It's true that Martha loves me, — a thing it's pretty hard to realize. But what are her people going to say? I've got to march into the Wainwrights' house and get the once-over from a couple of anxious parents, Teddy. There I shall stand, quaking like a criminal, trying to look ten years younger than I am and putting on the air of someone just out of the egg. Wainwright will have a perfect right to put me through the third degree. If he's anything like the father he's made out to be he probably will. That means that I shall have to dodge his questions and go forward through a jungle of lies or own up and either get told off or marry Martha against the wishes of her parents. See that? It's natural enough for my people to pooh-pooh all this, and even to contend that the modern girl is inclined to think all the more of a man who has knocked about. Their one remaining ambition is to secure the future of the family at any cost. I believe that, if things go through, I can make Martha so happy in the present that she won't want to go foraging into the past. All the same, there is a new and upsetting germ of honesty in the

back of my brain that persists in telling me that I am taking advantage of Martha's love and putting her to a very obvious sacrifice. I'm a battered thirty-four and she's a perfectly spotless nineteen. She has nothing to remember or regret and I have a cursed Blue Room full of memories, and the outstanding point is that she is *not* the average sophisticated unserious girl of whom my mother speaks. In a sort of way she's a freak, as girls go to-day. She's been brought up off the map among exactly the same traditions that have made you what you are. That's great, and I'm thankful for it. I don't look at marriage with the eyes of a bachelor. My wife has to be unlike any girl I've ever met, Miss Respectable in fact. But is that fair?"

He came to a halt in front of the sofa upon which Jedburgh had made himself comfortable. He had jerked out all these sentences on his to-and-fro prowl. And now he came to the big point, the sum total of the thing that had put that deep line on his forehead.

"Shall I play the game according to Hoyle or not? Shall I make a clean breast of it to Martha and run the risk of smashing her illusions — or let things go? That's what I want you to tell me, Teddy. Yesterday you advised me to board up my old Blue Room and said that it had been done before. I know it has. But I want you, knowing everything from our point of view, to take the Wainwright side. You're the only man whose final judgment is any good to me."

This was a mighty large order. . . . There was

no man alive whom Jedburgh liked more than Bill Mortimer. He knew him for a first-rate sportsman and one who had taken into his war service a consistent cheeriness and an utter disregard for self that had acted like magic on his regiment. He had found him out to be a kind-hearted, generous, simple-minded, homogeneous fellow, with all the normal weaknesses of sound and healthy men and one or two facets to his character, such as sentiment and a longing for children which, if properly developed, would put him up several pegs. He had seen him under the influence of what he had called the prodigal son's longing to indulge in an orgy of reconstruction, to build a church out of the ruins of his past. And he was in deep sympathy with all that. But he was now asked to sit in judgment of a case which affected the whole future happiness of a girl whose love he would have given some years of his life to have won, — a girl who had earned the right to be taken into marriage by a younger man with no Blue Room in his house, and he could only do so by totally eliminating himself, which was not easy. But he would do his best and give Bill the advice that he needed from the ordinary sane point of view.

"I don't see that you will achieve anything by making a clean breast of it, except to hurt Martha," he said. "She loves you and will marry you in spite of everything. Much better let the dead past bury its dead and leave your romance undamaged. You will pay your bill in regrets. Why ask her to

share in the payment? Let her off, my dear chap, and see to it that you devote the life that you make over to her entirely to her happiness. You can't do more than that. Cease feeling your own pulse and go ahead healthily. Your new leaf is clean and full of promise. That seems to me the normal way to look at it."

Bill heaved a big sigh of relief and sat down. The worried line faded away. He had asked for advice and received the only kind that he recognized instantly as good because it was precisely what he desired to have. He had not been wrong in banking on Jedburgh's wisdom and friendship.

"Thanks, Teddy," he said. "And now things shall begin to move. I am going to wangle things so that the marriage shall take place within a month. You'll be my best man, of course?"

"Of course," said Jedburgh, without the flicker of an eyelid.

III

THINGS began to move the following evening, which was Saturday.

Bill escorted his mother into the drawing room after dinner, made her comfortable on her favorite sofa, waited until the old man had settled down to listen to one of Jedburgh's outbursts on the piano, and then bent over the white-haired lady.

"So long, Mum," he said. "If you'll excuse me I'm afraid I shall have to leave you for the rest of the evening."

Mrs. Mortimer smiled and put his hand against her cheek.

"No, nothing so good as that," he said, catching in her eyes a picture of the hill and of Martha with her head on his shoulder.

"What then?" she asked.

"Nothing can go at my pace until I've asked the father's permission to marry his daughter in the good old way. So I'm off to the house to get it over." He made a most rueful face.

This time Mrs. Mortimer laughed. How like a boy Bill looked, standing there in a blue funk. She did n't see anything to be nervous about. Was there a father on earth who would n't jump at her son as a husband for his daughter? She would like to see such a man. "I had forgotten all about that ceremony," she said.

"I know. But I took the idea of it to bed last night and have been worrying out the proper speech the whole blessed day. Everything I've rehearsed will fly out of the top of my head the minute I stand on the mat, though. Whoo, but I've got the needle. However, I called up Tom Wainwright this morning and put him wise. He's been playing golf with his father all the afternoon and swore that he'd boost me a bit, — of course not saying a word about the engagement. It may make things a bit easier, don't you think so?"

The white-haired lady put her lips to the hand that had clutched her finger in the days when she was not much older than Martha, the memories of

which had come back to her very strongly and sweetly during the last month. It was nothing new to play second fiddle to another woman. Bill had replaced her very early in his career. But somehow, at that moment, after having enjoyed his affection and dependence for a whole month, she could n't help feeling jealous of this girl who had brought him to his knees, unreasonable as it was. The whole scheme had been hers, — the necessary step to the fulfillment of her last desire. "Poor old mother," she whispered, turning a sob into one of her soft laughs.

Bill did n't understand. He thought that age was being resented, and as this was one of his own grievances he bent down again and left on the withered cheek a kiss that was very full of sympathy. And the poor old mother interpreted this in the way it read best to her and was humbly grateful. The rewards of motherhood are like the rewards of fighting men, — afterthoughts conferred reluctantly.

The Old Rip, looking startlingly young in the Cathedral light at the piano end of the drawing-room, was absorbed in Jedburgh's improvising. He had got up and was leaning on the instrument, a graceful if somewhat too waisted figure. The false brown of his hair and mustache appeared to be less dead at that distance and his skin less meticulously tightened up by astringents and the energy of Denham's fingers. So Bill went out without disturbing him. "Good God," he thought, passing through the scented garden, "shall I have to make myself

look like that at his age? Martha, the old man's darling! . . ."

However, as Teddy Jedburgh had advised, he was not going to feel his own pulse or go forward with his eyes turned over his shoulder, in the manner of Lot's wife. He was determined to go straight ahead, with a rush, carrying Martha with him. The new leaf *was* clean and full of promise. It was his business to see that good things only were printed upon it. He ran across the frontier of the two places, the irresistible Bill Mortimer grin on his good-looking face, his teeth gleaming under his small mustache. Thirty-four? What of it! He was utterly young, absurdly young, and sound in wind and limb. He felt like a first-year undergraduate keeping tryst with his best girl. But he slowed down and felt the needle again, sewing him through the solar plexus, when he came into the lights of the Wainwright house.

And he drew up for a moment, not quite sure that he would n't bolt back and send a letter instead. The house struck him as being disturbingly Wainwrightian, forthright and upstanding, new and without anything to hide. Its architect was an old friend of Wainwright's. He had consciously designed it to fit the character of its owner. It had no frills. He had worked in no period stuff, given it no broken roof line or rounded corners; indulged in no narrow and suspicious front door with a queer knocker; no slit windows with bottle glass. He had set it down, in a wide bare space, frank and uncom-

promising, square, large, and defying criticism, its wide bald front door led up to by wide bald steps. It was essentially a house rather than merely a home, the house of a man who had no broken roof lines or rounded corners in his life, who had nothing to hide behind period stuff and bottle glass windows. . . . A victrola was at work. The tune of a lilting fox-trot came through one of the open windows. The click of billiard balls came too. . . . "Now then, Bill, you blighter. No jibbing. Take the jump with a bit over." He hunted for the bell, a thing all architects take a mischievous delight in hiding in the most unlikely place. And it seemed to ring and reverberate through the world. None too quickly the door was opened by a resentful girl brought away from a game of "Old Maid" with the grocer's delivery man. Martha halted on the stairs, with her heart in her mouth. . . . He had come to ask father, and mother was in the billiard room — and they were both stiff-backed about the Mortimers!

Bill was shown into the drawing-room, but before he could give himself another mental jerk lips were on his lips and arms clasped tightly round his neck and a little heart thumping against his chest. "Oh Bill, you darling!"

"I've come to do it," he said.

She caught something of his nervousness. "You're not afraid?"

He put his mouth to her ear. "Babe, I'm in the bluest funk of my life."

And they stood, close together, like the children in the wood, seeing vague shapes of trouble, until Martha caught the comic side of it all and threw back her head and laughed. Major Bill Mortimer, hero, knight, lover, come to ask for the Wainwright kid and afraid! It was too funny for words.

Then Tom dashed in and found Bill examining the contents of the *Atlantic Monthly* and Martha putting a photograph straight on an octagonal table.

"Oh hello, Major," he cried out, his round face shining. "This is the best thing that ever happened. Come along to the billiard room and meet . . ."

"Right," said Bill. "Wait a second. Er . . . did you manage . . ."

"You bet I did. It's easy. It's a walk-over. Come on." And as Martha led the way, with her eyes like stars, her lips a little apart and her young breast rising and falling, Tom clutched at her hand and gave her an emotional wink. If he had been given the choice of every man alive as the one to take his sister he would have plumped for good old Bill. Did n't he know him backwards under conditions that find out the sort of stuff a man is made of?

Down for the first time for some weeks, Mrs. Wainwright sat with a rug over her knees and a shawl round her shoulders. She might have been twin sister to the model who sat for the woman in Millais' pictures. All about her there was the air of a Madonna who knew the price of eggs and had

no intention of being "done" by anybody. Her face grew a shade more pale as the son of those blameworthy Mortimers came in with her two children. Something in Martha's eyes made her catch her breath.

"Mother, you know Major Mortimer?"

"No. I have not had that pleasure." The little woman had the fighting spirit.

Bill bowed over her hand and murmured a stereotyped phrase. Here was antagonism.

"Dad, you've met —"

Wainwright held out a cordial hand. "Never," he said. "I much regret to say. But I am extremely glad to do so now. You know my daughter, Major Mortimer?" It was a perfectly guileless lapse of memory. He had forgotten for the moment that Martha and Tom had recently dined at the Mortimer house and all that.

But it staggered Bill. Great Heaven, what a jump he had to take. He might have fallen from Mars. The only bright speck on the horizon was provided by Tom, who stood beaming upon him. Martha fluttered about, trying to hide excitement under a mask of casualness.

Bill could see, plainly enough, that although Mr. Wainwright accepted his visit in the friendliest way and without any suspicion of its object, Mrs. Wainwright's eyes were upon him like those of a mother fox at the approach of a hound. Intuition had told her that he had come after her girl. All over her pretty pale face was the question, "How far has

this gone?" Bill would have preferred to have been under the bombs of enemy aircraft, even.

The room was a large one, cheerful and comfortable, a combination of sitting-room and billiard room. It boasted one of those huge uncompromising stone fireplaces with which nothing earthly can be done and a collection of very red and white pictures of the Pickwick period, with fat horses, and rosy maids, and waggling cobble-stones and three-bottle-men illustrating the good old times in a bland and childlike manner that had its charm.

Tom rushed chairs forward, cigars and cigarettes, and for a long half hour there was general conversation which went from the golf course to weather, from President Wilson to the League of Nations. When Bill faltered under the minute examination of Mrs. Wainwright Tom plunged in like a porpoise and away it went again, Wainwright more and more taken by the visitor's good looks, modesty, and delightful though only occasional grin. And all the while Martha continued to flutter, now sitting on the arm of her mother's chair, now standing with her hand on her father's shoulder, saying nothing but looking a dictionary.

And just as Bill was coming to the conclusion that he would have to perform a strategic retreat and write a letter under the supervision of the Old Rip, Tom, a born soldier, acted on his own initiative and created a diversion. He sprang to his feet. "Dad," he said, "how about taking the Major into your den for a bit. I was telling him of the war relics that

you've collected. He's frightfully keen to see them."

Mr. Wainwright was up at once. He was proud of his German helmets and iron crosses and always glad to show off the room that he considered to be the nicest in the house. "Come along then, Major," he said. "No doubt you've seen a better lot than I've been able to get together, but one or two of the things are interesting, especially the diary of a Hun flying man that was given to me by a nephew of mine who found it in No Man's Land."

Bill followed him out, giving Tom one quick signal of thanks, but not daring to look at Martha. Mrs. Wainwright's eyes were still upon him. Here was his only chance. If there had been the rudiments of ordinary social hypocrisy in his soul he would have begun by saying, "Ah, this is a corking room," and insisted on inspecting the den from corner to corner with growing enthusiasm. Also, he would have made several not too subtle references to his host's high reputation and dragged in a purely imaginary tag of conversation overheard at the Country Club as to the excellence of his golf. All this to prepare the way for his bolt from the blue. But Bill was not made of this stuff. He had never played the lap dog or picked up the tricks of the glib society parasite. So what he did was to close the door, plant himself in front of Martha's father, give himself a metaphorical jab with the spurs, and blunder head first into the thing that sat so heavily on his chest.

"Mr. Wainwright," he said, putting his hands in his pockets and holding on to the floor with his feet, "I love Martha most awfully and I want you to be good enough to let her marry me. I ought to say that I've spoken to Martha and that she's ready to take the risk—I mean willing to undergo the . . ." The Bill grin followed on the heels of a wave of color that ran up to his forehead. He cleared his throat and took the finish hard. "In fact, she loves me and if you've no objection we should like to make plans to be married right away."

An equally simple man, devoid of social veneer, Wainwright gasped. This was indeed a bolt from the blue. It had occurred to him vaguely at odd moments that Martha would one day be carried out of his life and home and he had turned cold at the thought of the appalling gap that she would leave in them. But this was sprung so suddenly, without a preliminary hint. He knew nothing of this man except that he was a noted polo-player, Tom's Major, the son of two notorious people whose lives had run on totally different rails from his own,—that he was, although palpably a gentleman and a very winning person, years older than his little girl. . . .

"Good God," he said, standing aghast.

And there was one of those strange silences during which it is popularly supposed that an angel passes over the grave of a seaman,—though why a seaman necessarily nobody seems to know. And during this the two men held each other's eyes, the

one deeply disappointed at the reception given to his question, the other trying to find himself in a blank maze among all the windings of which Martha, the cheerful dependable Martha, the apple of his eye, was missing.

"You don't like the idea," said Bill, finally.

And that brought Wainwright back into the present with a thud. Good Lord, what had he said? "I never suggested that," he answered, nervously. "You caught me in the wind, I think. Honestly, you're the last man —"

"Say it," said Bill.

"Well, then, with apologies, you're not my idea of the man Martha would come to me about, Major Mortimer. When I thought about it at all, which, selfishly enough, I've tried not to do, I saw a young, — a younger fellow, the son of a man of my own class, in business, building up a career, and all that. You don't work — I've got to say this — and my wife will be afraid that the example of the Commodore — No, I can't go on."

Good Lord, he was going to ask for the key of the Blue Room! . . . "Yes, go on," said Bill.

"Sit down," said Mr. Wainwright. He pointed to a chair and placed another near by . . . Without trying this man made himself liked. He had straight eyes and was a sportsman. He made it possible to talk the A B C of things without juggling with words. He certainly could offer Martha pretty well everything there was from the worldly point of view, — money, leisure, travel, and pres-

ently the old house. Tom was crazy about him, and he ought to know. He had been a fine soldier, upholding the honor of the United States. . . .

"I've just this to say, and nothing else really matters." A little tremble crept into Wainwright's voice. "Martha has n't known any men, living out here, beyond the commuting lines. She was barely seventeen at the time we went into the war, — two years late, and with Tom in it and his young friends joining up, she had less chance than ever to measure men and come to conclusions. Then you come back, Tom's Major, of whom he had written in glowing terms, and find her in a state of khaki ecstasy, and it may be—and I'm afraid of this, deadly afraid, Mortimer—that unless you give her time to get back to normal she may wake up when it's too late. I have to speak like this. She means—I can't say how much to me. But if her love for you is the big thing —"

"Ask her," said Bill, eagerly.

After a moment's hesitation, Wainwright got up, went to the door, called, came back and stood looking at Bill in a curious half wistful half resentful way, hoping that he was all right for Martha's sake, feeling that he had come to steal the most precious thing in that house.

Martha flew in like a bird, shut the door, went straight to her father and put her face against his shoulder. There was a strong light on the banker's fine, well-balanced face, too deeply lined and too white at the temples for a man of his years.

Bill was up, waiting. He was without fear. Yesterday, on the hill, as the sun was going down, there had been something in Martha's eyes that allowed him now to stake his soul on the depth of her love.

But before Wainwright could find further words the door was opened again, and his wife came into the room, paler than ever, but with a firm step and the halo of motherhood about her pretty head.

"Why am I left out?" she asked.

In three strides Bill was at her side. He drew her hand through his arm and led her down.

"Mother," said Wainwright, "Major Mortimer has come to ask us for Martha. I called her in to tell me if she is quite certain that he is the man for her, absolutely sure of herself. If so there is nothing for us to do to keep her, nothing for us to say, except good luck."

Mrs. Wainwright gave a strange cry, freed herself from Bill and held out her arms. It was not the mother who held her child, but Martha who held the little delicate woman whose work she had done, whose prop she had been, and who, in the nature of things, must do without her soon when the nest was deserted.

And all three listened to an outburst of young lyrical passion that shook their hearts and stirred their blood.

"He is the man for me, the only man in this world. Night and day for two years, night and day, I've loved and waited and prayed, in agony and

anguish, and if he had never come back I should have loved and waited and prayed again, night and day for the rest of my life. And if he'd come back and passed me by I should have gone on doing my job, but in agony and anguish, night and day, for he is the only man in this world for me."

And then, kissing her and clinging for a moment in a sort of despair, Mrs. Wainwright turned to Bill and stood back as white as a lily. "She is yours," she said.

And Bill looked at Wainwright, who nodded and tried to smile. It was a poor effort. The den must lose its partner.

And like a bird again Martha flew into Bill's arms and held up her face.

And the mother went to her husband for comfort.

IV

AFTER that Bill continued his policy of wangling with an amount of nervous energy that put both houses into a fever of movement. Having obtained the consent of the Wainwright parents to his engagement, — a tremendous step in the right direction and one that left innumerable bunkers behind, — he decided to strike while the irons were hot and bring the date of the wedding nearer by two weeks. This was not going to be an easy business, because Mrs. Wainwright held old-fashioned ideas on the question of a trousseau, and having faced the inevitable might insist upon indulging in an orgy of

sentimental femininity which could only be satisfied by a riot of dressmaking and a long list of visits to department stores.

Martha was willing to walk out at any moment, find a church and get married. Had n't she been waiting for two years and a month? And Bill, to whom every moment had become precious, would have urged this easy course but for the advice of his mother. "Dear Bill," she said, with the impatient man pacing the room and wrecking the peace of the old quiet house, "we must consider the feelings of Mrs. Wainwright. She has inherited a certain Jane Austenism from her Boston relatives and won't believe that this marriage is made in Heaven unless Martha has at least four full trunks of perfectly new things. Once Boston always Boston, you know that. She has only just recovered from a long illness and is still delicate and frail. On top of this she has been suddenly tossed into a state of mental chaos, at the bottom of which there is a very natural fear as to the wisdom of letting her little girl slip out of her righteous home into that of those wicked Mortimers. A month must seem to her to be almost indecent haste. What the poor dear lady will say to a fortnight I really dare not think."

"Well, can't you see her," said Bill, "and get on her soft side by saying that July honeymoons are lucky, or something. She may be superstitious. I am and so's Martha. We're frightfully nervous about August, and of course September is simply asking for it. Martha has two absolutely new

frocks, she tells me, and loads of the other things. She could dash into town and fill a van with clothes in three hours. I'd go with her and help her choose them."

"A most immoral idea. For pity's sake don't suggest such a proceeding. Besides, why give away the fact that you know anything about what girls wear? Leave it to me, Bill. Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright are coming to dinner to-night with Tom and the dear child and I will see what can be done to — what's the word that you've brought back? — wangle things your way."

"Great work!" said Bill, and disappeared at a run. He was going riding with Martha in half an hour. There was no time to lose.

It was lucky for the Old Rip that he had stopped for a moment to admire himself in the glass in the hall. Otherwise there would have been a collision at the door. He had just performed his morning two-mile walk up and down the long drive from the house to the gates, followed under protest by his old water-spaniel which took no further exercise for the day on any pretext. Made up for a warm morning in a blue flannel suit with brass buttons and brown and white shoes that were the bane of Denham's life, the Commodore did not feel as cool as he looked. The routine had gone to the winds. The beautiful regularity and smoothness of pre-Bill days had been suddenly shattered. That boy, being officially engaged, now broke all the laws, had come late to breakfast, left before it had run its courses,

and was more like a kite without a tail than anything else. "It is appalling," the Old Rip said to himself, "and completely undermines all Denham's work on my face. However, it is for the good of the family, and it's about time I placed that before mere personal comfort. My reformation is complete."

Mrs. Mortimer welcomed him with a smile of quite genuine admiration, and, it being desirable to cajole him into his best temper for the trying evening that was to come, translated it into words. "My dear Barclay, you really are a most wonderful person. I thought Bill had come back until I realized that you alone among men wore clothes so well."

The old fellow preened himself at the double compliment. Nothing could have given him greater delight. He raised his wife's hand to his lips as only he, and the unessential husband of the dear dead Italian, could do it. But the last remnants of a never very keen sense of humor bubbled up unexpectedly. "My love," he said, "continue to say those charming things to me, but accept my promise at once to face our exemplary neighbors with the utmost tact and diplomacy. In one evening I guarantee to prove how cruel and wicked is the tongue of gossip. If Mrs. Wainwright does not take home with her a new opinion of me that will make her deeply regret her preconceived ideas I will eat my Panama hat cooked as a cereal." He chuckled like a sardonic parrot which had spent most of its receptive life in the cabin of a sea captain.

The white-haired lady gave a little laugh. "As I have often said before, Barclay, you ought to have been either a bishop or an ambassador. I think that if I wear my plainest dress and no jewelry, we tell Albery to serve nothing but a little Burgundy and we both refrain with grim determination from talking of anything but purely local things there will be a chance of our getting through the evening by the skin of our teeth. The last time I played the part of Plain Woman was at the house in New York when as Chairman of the Society for the Propagation of the Principles of Moral Conduct among the Mixed Choirs of the Country I entertained the members at tea."

And then, by mutual consent, these two people who had been forced to become mere observers of life and could very easily see the end of the road when they had the courage to look in that direction, dropped artificiality. In a sort of way they went together from the metaphorical stage on which they did their daily stunts for each other's entertainment and sat in a room behind the scenes — perfectly natural and human creatures for a brief space, anxious to do everything to push forward the marriage that was so vital to their plans.

"I'm scared about to-night, Lylyth," the old man said. "I want desperately for everything to go without a hitch. I hope to God I shan't say or do anything to jar Mrs. Wainwright and make her put a spoke in the wheel. Do you think I'd better be unwell and spend the evening upstairs?"

"But why, Barclay? You wouldn't desert me, surely?"

"Good Lord, no. Only,—well, to tell the bitter truth, my dear, I caught something that was said about me at the Country Club yesterday by a man of the Wainwright type,—I mean the hard-working, self-made, backbone-of-the-country man who has an absolute and perfectly natural contempt for one who never did a stroke of work in his life except in the way of enjoyment. 'God,' he said, hardly waiting for me to pass, 'what a comic.' H'h . . . Well, it might do Bill and the cause a service if I withheld myself from this first meeting and left you to do the honors and break down the prejudices. Tell me frankly, Lylyth. Never mind my feelings, my dear. I'm all out for Bill."

But Mrs. Mortimer had none of the deadly honesty that goes with the power to hurt. The absence of this falsely youthful man with the elaborate manners of a former generation would certainly help things. He must inevitably seem to the narrow Mrs. Wainwright to be the epitome of rips, and fill her with apprehension at the thought of his effect on Martha. From what she judged of the child's mother she did not possess the imagination to see in Barclay Mortimer not a comic but a tragic figure, clinging pathetically to life and imbued only with a touching eagerness to welcome a grandchild before his summons came. So she lied with her usual charm, as all kind women should, and took a chance.

"Bill and I would never forgive you if you left us in the lurch," she said. "Before the end of the evening Mrs. Wainwright will be finding excuses for your gallant history and putting the blame on the sirens who led you astray." And she kissed her hand to him.

Poor old fellow, brought back to childhood by the degenerating hand of age. His mouth did strange things and his eyes flooded with tears. "You—you have a golden heart, my dear," he said. "I wish that I had been a better man to you!"

It might have given some satisfaction to them both to know that the Wainwright parents were equally scared at the evening which faced them, equally anxious to make a good impression. Martha loved Bill in a way that carried all before it. And Bill, it was perfectly plain, returned it in kind. Who were they, then, to punish these two for the sins of their parents? What else could they do but accept the inevitable with courage and prayer and be as nice as they could to Bill's father and mother for Martha's sake?

"The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together."

Bill escorted his mother's guests as far as the bridge, walking with Mrs. Wainwright. Jedburgh followed with Martha, telling her a story of Bill's coolness under fire which made her eyes flame with pride. Tom and his father brought up the rear,

arm in arm. The boy would marry some day, and then what?

There were several moments of acute jealousy and startling realization of the change that had taken place in their lives when Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright walked on without Martha, seeing the picture of her in Bill's arms through the back of their heads.

It was not late, but with the feeling that to-morrow would be the first of a short series of crowded days no one stayed up. Wainwright unhooked his wife's frock. He had n't the remotest idea how she felt about the evening and being a wise man left it to her to express herself without questions. "Those Mortimers" had often been the subject of shocked conversation during the last two years, and Martha's friendship with the white-haired lady had caused much heart-burning. What now? He himself had been completely won over by Mrs. Mortimer, had found the Commodore, after the first shock, most kind and delightful and had never been in a house that he liked so much. Would his wife have the moral courage to eat her words and own up to a new point of view, he wondered? If so, he would be considerably surprised and very proud. A woman who could alter her mind could alter anything.

"How did you like the dinner service?" she asked, doing her hair and coming to the Great Question in her own way.

"Stunning," replied Wainwright, who had n't noticed it.

"I wish we'd bought some of those hooked rugs at Kennebunkport last year. They go best, of course, with Colonial furniture, but they would have looked nice in this room. I saw several to-night that made my mouth water. It's a very wonderful house, you know, John."

"Is it?" He showed no enthusiasm.

"Well, could n't you see that it was? History, atmosphere, refinement and everything so spotlessly clean and well kept. It's like one of the old famous show houses in England. It's a very fine family."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You suppose so? — But, my dear John, did n't you see the story of its achievements in those beautiful portraits? The Mortimers have been making American history since the earliest days. Where were your eyes, John?"

But Wainwright had been married too long to permit himself to laugh. "I was looking mostly at Mrs. Mortimer," he said, taking out his studs.

"John, it's my opinion that Mrs. Mortimer, like other women who have taken leading positions in society, has been maligned. There is a sweetness about her, and . . . and a simplicity that could *not* belong to any woman who had not lived and thought well, — and I very soon noticed that her love for Bill, from the way she looked at him, was much too great to go with the — the flightiness of which she has been accused."

Bill, — how easily she had achieved that name. Unexpected creatures, — women. He was so consumed with curiosity to hear what she would say about the old man that he put the question. It was his first mistake.

“I don’t like him,” she replied. “Like all men who dye their hair he looks a little unearthly. I don’t mean angelic, but weird, grotesque. One expects him to fall to pieces and sits on tenterhooks. He looks like an actor leaving a theater after a matinee in his make-up. Not that I’ve ever seen one. All the same, he must have been very handsome when he was young, and I always think that nothing is a greater handicap to a young man than that, especially when he begins with too much money and nothing to do. I don’t withdraw my opinion of the Commodore. He has done things that must make his ancestors, — and *do* make, he told me so, — look down upon him with anger and contempt. But, and this he told me too, — he has suffered great remorse and is a changed character. And he gave me one beautiful and moving thought, John. He said that Bill had done a great deal in his war service to wipe the stain from the family but that it was to Martha that they all looked to place the name back to where the late Mortimer men had left it, — to our little Martha, John. Think of that, dear.” Her voice broke.

Wainwright had been thinking of that all the evening, and, he had to confess it, without overwhelming satisfaction. He didn’t honestly give

a tinker's curse about the glory of the name of Mortimer. His one intense anxiety and concern was for Martha to be happy with Bill. The more he saw of Bill the more he found him a good sportsman, and a most likable fellow, cheery, sincere and without side. His baby, his dear pal-daughter, who had stuck to home and played the game with such pluck and made herself a place in his house and heart that would be cold and empty when she had gone, — *she* was his one consideration and her happiness his only thought. Never mind Bill's people. Was Bill all right? He was thankful to believe that he was. . . . When was his wife coming to Bill, by the way, — the one who really mattered?

But before Mrs. Wainwright brought Bill into her summing up of that epoch-making evening, she went round by the silver and Albery, the unostentatious meal and wine, the length of the drawing-room, the size of the closets and the quietness of Jedburgh. "I like Bill," she said finally. "He's — he's such a boy. I'm thankful to be well again, John. There are only two weeks in which to get Martha's trousseau together."

All of which, especially the last remark, went to prove that the white-haired lady's promise to wangle things had been very well kept.

V

THE excitement of the following days was added to by the extraordinary publicity that was given the announcement of the forthcoming marriage.

Martha had never dreamed of finding her name and photograph in the papers and was, as might be expected, utterly unaware of the fact that this is an almost too easy feat to achieve. You might have supposed that the Mortimer-Wainwright wedding was almost as important to the public as the many grave problems which followed upon the heels of the war. The history of the Mortimers was dragged out of dusty pigeonholes and printed on front pages, hashed up in society columns with spicy comments and inaccurately referred to by paragraphists in the Women's Sections of evening papers. Strings of male and female reporters invaded the quietude of the two houses with the inevitable camera, and privacy was debauched.

But through it all Mrs. Wainwright drove to town daily with Martha, ticking off items on an ever lengthening list. It was not easy to buy summer clothes in shops which in their race to be ahead of time were already given over to autumn wear and furs. As to all good mothers, this was a time of exhilaration and pain, and Mrs. Wainwright, swept out of the individualism of the sick woman, enjoyed both sensations fully.

Wearing an engagement ring upon which Bill had spent deep thought and much money Martha followed her mother from shop to shop as in a dream. To see her standing among deft-fingered dressmakers with a genius for placing pins, far away, a little odd smile on her lips, not knowing or caring whether the things being made for her were good or bad, for

night or day, must have been a little irritating to those concerned.

"Do you like that effect, darling?"

"Yes, Mother."

"But don't you think it would be better with this piece brought round like this instead of like that?"

"Yes, Mother."

"And are you quite sure about the color?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You don't think you'd like a little relief at the waist?"

"Yes, Mother, — I mean no, Mother."

Whereupon Madame would shrug her Fifty-Seventh Street shoulders, and Mrs. Wainwright, disappointed but remembering her own far-off days of first love, would go back to her trousseau-collecting with a renewed sense of responsibility.

It was during this period of bustle and fluster and continually arriving boxes from New York to a house left more or less to the untender mercies of his servants, that Wainwright was brought face to face with the problem that has to be solved by all men who live to give away their daughters in marriage. Lunching at the Bankers' Club in the middle of the week, one of those over-breezy smack-you-on-the-back men went up to him, gave his usual hearty and meaningless laugh and proceeded to say all the wrong things in quick succession. "Marrying off the daughter, eh, Wainwright? Be a grandfather before you know where you are, haw-haw. Bit

of a sport, Bill Mortimer, reg'lar chip of the old block. About time he settled down and became domestic. Always had a soft side for the ladies, that chap, and picked some fancy ones too, as I know. Envied him the blond angel that was with him on his yacht when he put into Bermuda the winter before the war. I'll say she was some peach. Congratulations, old man. It's a fine family. . . ."

Wainwright lay awake that night, with the old and almost inevitable problem weighing heavily on his soul. Hitherto, in his desire to deal bravely and unselfishly with the loss of his little girl, he had allowed himself to consider nothing but the question of her immediate happiness. She had loved Bill Mortimer for two years, and had consecrated her prayers to his safety from the day that he went away to the day that he came back. In the right romantic spirit of all young things who have not undergone the flattening-out process of boarding-school sophistication she had exalted this man to the rank of a hero, enrolled him among the gods. He was and must be without fear and without reproach. In her outburst of love and triumph that night in the den which had carried Wainwright and his wife off their feet, these facts were established beyond argument. The mother, like Wainwright himself, had been swept before the tidal wave of Martha's unquestioning faith into a blind acceptance of Bill at his face value. Their prejudices had crumbled shamefacedly after meeting and feeling the charm

of the Mortimers in their rare old house. They had not allowed themselves or been allowed time to consider the moral side of Bill's suitability. The material side was so obviously right. In one moment, however, Slap-you-on-the-back had thrown down the screen and disclosed the evidences of a Blue Room in Bill's life. And now, with his house choking with trousseau, the papers reeking with announcements, and only a few days remaining between the power to act and the tying of the knot, Wainwright lay stark awake in the middle of the night. And the problem that had to be solved was this, older than the hills: was he to exert all his influence to save the daughter whose life and mind were as spotless as the heart of a rose from the hands of a man who had been "a sport" and "a chip of the old block," or fall back on the usual masculine line of argument in such a case, shrug his shoulders, say men will be men, and let it go at that? . . . For something over eighteen years this child, his only girl, the apple of his eye, had belonged wholly to him and his wife, tended and cared for, protected and inspired. Suddenly, simply for the reason that a total stranger had touched a chord and filled her heart with music, was all this to go for nothing, was she to be delivered over without a word? The blond angel of the Bermuda episode alone made Bill unable to hold his rank among the gods. It was implied that, as "a sport," he had other disqualifications. Were this child's love and faith to be left unshaken, or was it Wainwright's

duty as a sane man and owner by all the rights of fatherhood to hold up his hand, even now, and cry out "This man is unfit?"

Wainwright's own life had been as clean as a new slate. He had begun to earn his living at the age of fourteen. So fully occupied had he been with his day's work and his evening classes that there had been no time left for looseness, and no spare money. There had been nothing of the saint about him, nor did he whip himself along the straight path with the lash of religion. Ambition and the infinite capacity for taking on all the work that he could get had kept his nose to the grindstone. He had marked out a goal for himself and gone for it. He had been young when he married, and with the added load of a young wife on his shoulders work had to become a greater fetish than ever. His inclinations had been divided equally between ambition and home. He had been blessed with a temperament which had no artistic tangents. It was nothing to his moral credit, but wholly to his business one-eyedness that when the ordinary self-indulgences called they were unheeded. He did n't say to himself now, "You are a good man, Wainwright, a better man than others," and advertise his rectitude in the market place like a prohibitionist and a Pharisee, made up for the part in the ill-fitting self-conscious clothes of a crank, ostentatiously subscribing to one or other of the numerous creeds through which it is difficult to find any real religion. He was not one of those grossly pure men to whom everything is

indecent, — the self-appointed censors of life. He had preserved his sanity and his sense of humor, had grown in sympathy and tolerance and fully recognized the fact that he had himself escaped from the penalties of human weakness only because he had had no time and no money with which to make hobbies of them. When, therefore, he rose in the morning, tired but clear-brained, the conclusion that he had arrived at was this. Somewhere on earth there might be and probably was the man who was fit in every respect to be the husband of his beloved Martha. If he could be produced it was a hundred to one against her falling in love with him. Here, however, was Bill who adored her and whom Martha adored, a simple, likable, boyish fellow, who had been a first-rate soldier. He had already paid certain installments for his mistakes. Everything has to be paid for. It was probably true that in some way in future, as his wife, Martha would be called upon to pay the balance. But she loved him, and that was part of the willing price of love. All Wainwright could do was to be thankful for small mercies, hope to God that Bill's love for Martha was big and fine enough to make him go straight from now on — and leave it at that.

VI

“TEDDY, old son,” said Bill, one fine morning before breakfast, as they turned their horses' noses stablewards after taking them over the jumps that

had been put up in the fields to the west of the house, "everything's going my way. It's marvelous. I can hardly believe it."

"Why? You were born under a lucky star. Has n't everything always gone your way?"

"Yes, but this time, the one time in my life when if things don't go my way they put me into an unholy smash, I've been afraid to rely on my good old star. I don't mind telling you, old man, that the last ten days have been the worst I've ever been through. During every hour of 'em all I've been haunted with the fear of coming up against the little devil who potters about the earth waiting his chance to play his fiendish tricks with the plans of mice and men."

Jedburgh ran his eyes over the good-looking face of the bare-headed, sun-tanned man who rode at his side. The happy-go-lucky expression which had first attracted him to Bill when they had hunted together in England before the war was no longer there. Nor had it been since he had arrived at the house. Worry had drawn several lines under his friend's eyes, and sleepless nights had left behind them a nervous tension of which he had been peculiarly free. Men of magnificent health who fall ill for the first time imagine that the world has turned upside down and see Death lurking at the foot of the bed. Anxiety, which had been an utter stranger to Bill, had hit him harder than it does the man who had had other doses of it. "Well, there are only three days more," he said, "and away you go on

your honeymoon. I don't see what the little devil can do now, Bill."

"I don't, either." But all the same he darted a look from side to side and rapped his knuckles against a branch. "The trousseau is more or less all in. Martha is going to town for the last time to-day. Mrs. Wainwright was very cheery with me last night, — almost motherly, in fact. And Wainwright, who's one of the best, has dropped looking at me as if I were a thief who had stolen Martha. Tom is a boy one will like most awfully to have as a brother. He's a corker. One way and another, then, there is n't a cloud in the sky and only three days to go before I have the chance to show everybody concerned that Bill's reconstruction is going to be a lasting one, and that Martha, please God, shall never regret taking him on for good and all. I wish I could see you as happy as I am, old man."

Jedburgh wrinkled up his eyes. "Impossible, Bill," he said. "While we're indulging in a burst of ego I'll tell you something. The bloody war, which people are gulling themselves into thinking is over, has dug into my system. It's in me like a cancer. I don't believe there's a dog's chance of my getting cured and settling down somewhere to breed horses or something, because every time I take up the paper and see that all our work has gone for nothing blasphemy rises to my head and I'm an ill man again. It's no good your saying, 'Why take it seriously? What the devil's it got to do with you?' My answer is, it's got over four of the

best years of my life to do with me, my home and future, and all the dead bodies that I have only to close my eyes to see lying about in vast heaps, forgotten, chucked into that massacre in vain. . . . One came out of this orgy of lunacy, — I mean we, the older men, — hoping with a great intensity that the lessons of the war would be made immediate use of and that its horror and madness would have shocked some sort of unselfishness and nobility into the souls of the creatures who ran us into the mess. But, by God, that hope is a vain and foolish one, as every single day goes to show. The men who are misrunning the Peace show are the same political muddlers who misran the war show. Without any sense of shame they are in their same old jobs, fighting and struggling for personal triumphs, advertising and misdirecting in the same old way. They have come out of their funk holes to stand in the limelight and take the bow with the same old effrontery and cynicism, — laughing like the devil at ‘those fools the people.’ They have been permitted to retain their hold of the various governments by us, you and me and the other fellow, because we don’t care. They are perfectly safe to go on drawing their salaries and being promoted every time they fail and playing merry hell with all the appalling problems their own particular war has left in its wake. Each gang has its papers to boost them and undermine their rivals and every single thing they are doing now is not for the good of their particular country but to strengthen their political

party and consolidate themselves. The Governments are like a lot of backyard cats fighting for bones. It's a sight that must make every dead man writhe in his grave, if he's got one, and every wounded man vow never again to allow them to move him one inch. But all the same we shall continue to leave them where they are, because it's too much fag to organize against them, and they'll mess up the Peace as they messed up the war and go on blundering and bleeding the people till the end of time. It's nobody's fault but ours, — yours and mine and the other fellow's. We'll pay any price to buy even half the right to look for happiness, and snatch the sunny moments when they come. But if we all cared about the universal happiness we would n't let things remain as they are or leave our fate to the tender mercies of the professional politicians who have run civilization into its present chaos."

He rode his horse into the yard, dismounted, gave the bridle to a boy and with a look of apology to Bill for his outpouring, walked off to be alone. His *crise de nerfs* demanded either solitude or multitude.

Bill watched him go, asking himself who there was to give his pal the right sort of tonic. He was indulging in the most pitiable of all forms of foolishness. He was kicking his foot against the pricks, by which he achieved nothing but very sore toes. Bill did n't mind being lumped into the "us" who "did n't care." He frankly did not care.

The be-all and end-all of his hopes and desires was to be safely and happily married to Martha and wash out his past record by playing the game. For the rest, — well, yes, let Teddy place him among the other fellows. Things seemed to come out pretty right in the long run, in spite of the rotten politicians. . . . He wondered whether Teddy Jedburgh would have flung more than an occasional ordinary curse at the heads of the old Bad Men if, like himself, he were on the verge of marriage with such a darling as Martha.

The same speculation entered Jedburgh's head as the scent of the roses smoothed out his rage. He would have rejoiced to believe that he had become normal enough to let the earth stew in its own grease till the crack of doom if Primrose were going to be his wife. But he had come to realize the truth of his malady. It was a cancer, as he had told Bill. He was one of the numerous victims of permanent shell shock caused by the sight of blood and blunders whose soul contained the germ of revenge and to whom happiness was no longer within reach. Sooner or later he would have to go forth and speak his thoughts aloud to crowds, and his friends, raising their eyebrows in horrified surprise, would say, "Good God, Jedburgh's gone dotty. He's become a Bolshevik."

VII

CUTTING breakfast Bill hurried to keep an appointment with Martha before she made her last

trip to town. The path in the lengthening grass from the bridge to the Wainwright garden had been made by him since the day of his engagement. The rolling field was alive with wild flowers, white and yellow and purple streaked with the curious red of sorrel. Half-tame squirrels, looking out wholly for themselves, as usual, darted inquisitive looks at Bill as he passed. Sunlight shimmered over everything.

Dressed for the journey Martha waved her hand when, from the flat rock on the crown of the incline, she saw Bill waiting for her in the usual meeting-place. She danced all the way down like a wood nymph who had stolen conventional clothes, her teeth gleaming and her eyes alight with the sheer joy of being alive. And he caught her and swung her off her feet, her laughter floating into the air like blown petals. There was little of the diffident lover about Bill these days.

It was only between kisses that she was able to find out his plans for the day. "Please, please, Bill. I've only two minutes."

"I'm in a foursome this morning," said Bill. "After lunch I shall be in town too."

"Meet me somewhere at five o'clock and drive me back. Mother won't mind. Oh, Bill, you must."

"I'd love it, my sweet, but I have business to see to that'll keep me in town. I'm going to dine in my rooms and sleep there and see my lawyer again in the morning."

If he had looked quickly behind the nearest tree he might have seen the little devil lurking, with an evil leer on his face.

"And you won't be here to-night? What an awful blow! This is the last time I shall see you then until I stand trembling at the altar."

"Good Lord, why?"

"It's Mother's idea. It is n't conventional for us to have anything to do with each other during the three days before the ceremony, she says."

Bill gave a perfectly sincere imitation of mental collapse.

"But there's the telephone, Bill, and here's the chance for you to write me letters and tell me properly all the things you've forgotten to say. Exactly how much you love me,—you've never really told me that?" She crept as close as she could and held up her face.

"It is n't easy to tell you that," said Bill. "I'd have to be a poet. And if I tried to write it, it 'ud take all the rest of my life. And then someone would have to edit my spelling." But the kiss he gave her told more than all the volumes in the Public Library.

"The last touches to my wedding dress to-day, Bill," she whispered.

"What's it like, Babe?"

"White, I believe, but does it matter?"

"Nothing matters except the band that binds you to me, darling."

There was a loud woo-hoo.

"That's Tom," said Martha. "I asked him to let me know when the car came round."

"Oh, hang the car."

"No, I must go. It gives Mother ten fits to be late for an appointment. Good-by, Bill."

"Not Good-by. I hate your saying that."

"So long, then." She flung her arms round his neck. "I love you, I love you, I love you," she said, "and *then* I love you."

"And I don't just love you," said Bill, wishing to God that those words had never been on his lips before. "I adore you, my dearest. You are everything in life to me. I only want the chance to show you what I mean by that."

Once more the loud woo-hoo.

Martha broke away and up the hill she went, turning for a moment at the top to wave her hand again.

Bill went slowly back to the bridge, the brook singing its merriest song to the trees under whose crowded branches it ran and to the wild flowers that watched it from the banks. But he did n't go home at once. He went up to the hill of the Seven Sisters, and sat there for a while, looking across the placid valley to the smudge of hills beyond. His soul was stirred to the exultation that comes to men who love beyond expression and who realize, with joy and amazement, that they are the master of a young and exquisite life, that it is their almost divine responsibility to act and speak and think in such a way as that they shall inflict no bruise, however slight, no

disillusion, however fleeting. To this simple, hitherto happy-go-lucky, easily led man there came the glorious feeling of having received permission to begin life all over again, this time not for his own pleasure but so that he might give unblemished happiness to a little partner whose utter faith in him was wonderful and awe-inspiring and the infinitude of whose love filled him with a deep determination to forget self and give everything. Overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude for this favor he laid himself, in spirit, at the feet of God and vowed, out there under Heaven, to dedicate all the rest of his years to the child whose heart had been placed in his care and to justify himself for having been permitted to go untouched by the hand of Death so that he might be worthy of his trust.

God would not be God if He were not accustomed to be forgotten except in moments of great pain or great happiness.

VIII

BILL's lawyer belonged to the old dignified school of the Eighties, — now almost extinct. His office of many discreet and comfortable rooms was in one of the old buildings in Union Square. Three partners composed the firm, and each one sat in seclusion, — cheerful, urbane, and leisurely gentlemen whose time and perspicacity were wholly at the disposal of every individual client. Not for them the modern methods of unconcentrated rush, the pernicious telephone, undammed in the outer office, which dis-

turbed consultations with irritating persistence nearly every two minutes. Not for them the discussion of other people's business with interrupting clerks nor the straining of voices above the constant ticking of typewriting machines. In a perfectly quiet room, furnished like a study and with an air of aloofness that inspired confidences, Bill signed his will and testament and the papers relating to his marriage settlement, made an appointment for the following morning, received the hearty congratulations and good wishes of his friend and advisor, and walked uptown under the waning light of the afternoon sun with the complete satisfaction of being one up on Fate.

The only evidences of war that still clung by accident to Fifth Avenue were Thrift Stamp posters. If people looked at these at all it was with the quite natural resentment that followed on the heels of the revelations of the Government's colossal waste, extravagance and mismanagement and with the sense of anger at having mortgaged their income to take up Liberty Bonds which, if they were obliged to sell, gave them a loss and made them feel, rightly or wrongly, that they had been "used" as patriots,—a most unfortunate reaction. The amazing Avenue had, otherwise, superficially recovered itself. Its great business houses were undermined by strikes and a shortage of labor and commodities, but outwardly they were as they had been before Germany deliberately raised the lid of Hell.

On his way to his apartment through the uncountable crowd, each unit of which struggled eagerly to escape from the City for the few short hours before the equally eager struggle to reinfest it began, Bill's eyes were on the future, — the honeymoon, the return to the old house, the quiet routine of a home life that had never before been known to him. In the first series of pictures that he conjured up Martha was the dominating figure, young and sweet and laughing, the hope of his family, the core of his life and interests. And as these slipped away they were replaced by others in which a new and tiny presence came, the sight of whom did something amazing to his heart. And as he crossed Fifty-Seventh Street with his eyes far ahead and a smile on his lips a taxi was stopped suddenly on the west side of the Avenue and two girls hurried out, one paying the driver, the other making a fish-like dart across the street to plant herself in front of Bill.

"It is you," she said. "You looked so like St. Anthony passing through the rude world that I could n't believe it. Marry first and then become a minister. Is that the great idea?"

From the future to the past and back with a jerk to the present. "Oh hello, Birdie," said Bill. "How are you?"

"So surprised that you remember little me, my dear, that I don't know how I am. You've been doing the aloof stunt pretty successfully since you got back, have n't you, Bill?"

Susie Hatch came up and held out her hand.

"My dear Susie, where have you dropped from?" He looked round to see how many more of the occupants of his Blue Room were going to descend upon him.

The nimble-minded musical comédienne with the plum-colored lips, the rouged cheeks and the thin line of eyebrows which, having recently been plucked, left her with a disconcerting expression of permanent surprise, gave a gurgle of mirth. "Don't be nervous, my dear," she said. "We're the only two. We spotted you from a taxi and just *had* to hold you up to mingle tears. They've been washing your family linen pretty well in the papers lately, eh?"

The look in Susie's eyes took Bill all the way back to his cabin on the "Iolanthe" and those days when he had carried the sea-maid into life.

"Come along to my apartment," he said, "and let's have a yarn, if you can spare the time."

Susie shook her head. Her face was very white. "I can't," she said, quickly. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

Bill understood and would not have pressed the invitation. Not so Birdie, who had chirped her way through several affairs since her interlude with Bill and would probably chirp through several others before her feathers began to fall. "Oh, Susie," she said. "Don't talk that way, honey. This means a whole lot to me. And I shall have plenty of time before I have to do my bit to-night. Thank

you, Bill dear. We'd love to look at the old place once more, and wish you luck. Be a sweetie, honey."

In the manner of all young women who belong to the baby type and make an asset of a soft and clinging irresponsibility she gained her point. Beneath what Jeanne Dacoral called her pussy-purr-purring there was a tremendous amount of will power. If she did n't get what she wanted at the very moment that she wanted it something snapped.

The apartment was in apple-pie order. Itoto had been notified of Bill's intention to spend the night in town and had used unaccustomed elbow-grease. There was a rumor in the house that the rooms were going to be sub-let and the furniture removed. Itoto was playing up to be kept on. He wore a photographic smile and bobbed about like an air bubble in a bottle of cod liver oil.

"Ah, these dear, dear rooms," cried Birdie, clasping her hands together and posing, devoid of the elementals of sincerity, for sentiment. A pretty, plump little person, with a tiny nose and round chin and large blue eyes, she might have looked charming and attractive but for her ineradicable belief that it did n't matter how comic and impossible she made herself so long as the clothes she wore had been declared "smart" by the ladies' fashion papers. To see her standing in Bill's masculine sitting room in a silly skirt that foreshortened her body, mounted on the high heels of blunt-nosed French shoes with laces wound up to her calves, with

a string of pearls on an ample display of bosom and an ugly little hat out of which, like a danger signal, a yard of costly feathers stuck at a most absurd angle, was enough to draw a gasp of derisive laughter from any stone gargoyle. And yet she was blissfully satisfied at her appearance because it had cost some thousands of dollars to achieve and was quite the latest thing. Poor dear pathetic women, — how many of them eagerly sacrifice self-respect on the comic altar of smartness.

Susie shuddered at the sight of the place which stood for home and went over to the familiar window seat for the last time.

Far from happy or even comfortable, Bill opened a box of cigarettes. He would have given a good deal to have escaped from these sudden reminders of dead days.

With a long-drawn sigh Birdie kissed her hand to the sofa and the pictures and the old familiar sporting trophies and forced a tear or two without any serious effort. But her brain was working and a new scheme taking shape. "Bill, dear," she said tremulously, "I must use the telephone. Excuse me for a moment, will you?" She disappeared into the familiar bedroom, shut the door and called up Jeanne Dacoral, whom she had just left. The number was provided with unusual alacrity. "Jeanne? Susie and I are at Bill's place. Come over right away, my dear. I'm going to make him crack a bottle or two. He shan't be let off without a touching scene of farewell and a little speech. It

would n't be right. Come right over quick. It's only a step."

It was only a step. Jeanne's apartment was in Fifty-Eighth Street, west of the Plaza.

"Well, Susie, how goes it?" asked Bill.

"Fine," said Susie, in armor from head to foot.

"How's art?"

"Fine."

"That's good. Where are you going for the summer?"

"Haven't decided yet, Bill. Somewhere with Birdie within commuting distance. Rye, perhaps. Her play looks like running through. She can drive out after the show." She smiled up at him and gave no sign of the ache that was in her heart. But the hand that touched Bill's as he lit her cigarette was as cold as ice. . . . A very different girl this from the one dressed in a faded blue suit of boy's bathing clothes with her hair bleached almost to silver and her eyes as empty of man-knowledge as those of a sea-gull. In the awkward pause that came upon them Bill asked himself whether the life that she had begged so intensely to be given was not, after all, better in its effects than the inevitable poverty and roughness and early loss of beauty that must have been hers had she stayed in that sea-sprayed village on the coast of Maine, to be the wife of a fisherman, and the mother of a school of beach urchins. Here, in the city, in spite of her wounded heart, she had elbow room for her soul, means with which to cultivate her artistic gifts and none of the

sordid struggles to wrench a little peace, a little comfort and an hour or two for dreams out of the daily drab monotony to which he must have left her.

He preferred, at any rate, to believe these things, and, man-like, argued with his qualms of conscience in favor of this view.

IX

"WELL," said Mrs. Wainwright, "that's over. The wedding dress is finished." And in contradiction of her tone of emphatic relief she heaved a sigh of perfectly natural feminine regret. No words could describe the emotions of those busy trousseau days. They had given her a renewal of her youth. To women who have lived through the great adventure of marriage however happily there must always be much that moves to pity as well as to excitement in the wedding preparations of their daughters. The chances are all in favor of disaster.

"Yes," said Martha. "That's over." But she was thinking less of the wedding dress than of the hours during which she had been concocting a plan whereby she might escape from her mother and see Bill, and the rooms in which he had spent so much of his life before it became hers. She had made one up and it now remained to be seen if she could, to use one of Bill's frequent words, wangle it successfully.

They passed down the wide stairs of the pompous

building of the celebrated and exorbitant milliner in Fifty-Seventh Street, up which so many women hurried daily with sheeplike eagerness to be made to look ridiculous in return for great gobs of other people's gold.

A man in the coat of an Admiral, the trousers of a General, the cap of a Field Marshal and the face of an excellent specimen of protoplasm went off to retrieve the car. He moved like an amateur, — one who had taken on the job for a joke, or whose sense of democracy made it necessary to prove that, although he chose to be a car-runner, he was just as good and probably a darned sight better than his employer and her customers. So Martha had plenty of time during which to spring her little surprise.

"You know that Elizabeth Bartlett had arranged to come to us to-morrow to stay over until the wedding, Mother."

"Her room's ready. I hope she has n't altered her mind. As your oldest friend . . ."

"No, no, Mother. Nothing like that. Elizabeth is going to leave even her husband to be with me these next few days. The only difference in the arrangement is — and I'm sure you won't mind, — that she drives home to-night instead of to-morrow, after she and I have had dinner in town."

"Which means that I have to make this long journey alone."

"Yes, Mother, just this once."

The subtle change in the tone of the girl who

until that moment had been the loving and dutiful daughter and who had never conceived the possibility of doing anything without a preliminary consultation came upon Mrs. Wainwright like a thunder-clap. They had changed places in the scheme of things. The young wife came first now, and the elder lady must accept her altered position as "just mother", an institution, one who had served her purpose in life. . . . A tiny smile stole over her delicate prim face and she bowed to her little girl with just the suggestion of irony.

"Very well, darling," she said. "But try not to be very late. I would like to get to bed in good time after a tiring day."

This unexpected humbleness startled Martha and for a moment shook her desire to dine alone with Bill in his bachelor rooms. "What a beast I am," she thought, "and how I hate to deceive her like this. But she would think the world was coming to an end if I told her what I want so awfully much to do, and go home miserable. So it can't be helped. Poor little mother! She's lost me at last." She put her arm round Mrs. Wainwright's shoulder and kissed her. "You *are* a brick," she said.

At last the car was brought up. "I'll drive you to East Sixty-Fourth Street, darling."

That was awkward. Martha had telephoned to Mrs. Bartlett to expect her at nine o'clock. There would have to be explanations if she turned up at six. The dinner engagement was a myth. Above all things she wanted to enjoy the thrill of this ad-

venture, her first effort at complete independence, as a secret, something about which she and Bill might talk in the future as a special romance of their own.

"No, thank you, Mother. "I'll walk," she said. "It's only a few blocks and I want the air after being shut up all day."

Never before had this child been allowed by her father and mother to go alone in the streets of New York. But once more that little smile flickered and Mrs. Wainwright bowed again. Youth had come into its own. Her day was over.

Martha shut the door of the car, kissed her hand and watched it edge its way out into the moving traffic, — a girl on the very verge of womanhood. And the little mother, still in the middle forties, sat all alone, very upright, with her chin high and her hands clasped and the smile playing round her lips. But two hot tears rolled down her pale cheeks and in her heart there was the pain of a pricking needle.

"I won't go to Bill's rooms until half past six," thought Martha. "I want to find him there. I want him to spring up when I am shown in and rush forward to meet me. I want to hear him cry out 'Hello Babe' and catch me in his arms as though he had n't seen me for ten years. I want him to take me all round and tell me the history of everything and make me feel that all the years I have missed with him are mine just the same. I want him to be excited and merry and tender, and feel that we're stealing two hours out of convention and

to sit opposite to him at his dinner table as though we had been married a long time and feel like a perfectly calm woman of the world with the slips of foreign hotels all over my luggage. And then I shall not want to go and he won't want me to go and he'll hold me tight and kiss me and whisper and I shall cling and cry a little and tear myself away and drive home with Elizabeth with birds singing in my head and my heart in my mouth to wait until he puts the ring on my finger and we are never to be apart again, never, never."

And to keep pace with the thoughts that made her eyes sparkle and her breath come quick, the soon-to-be-bride went swiftly not up past Bill's rooms and the Netherland Hotel but down past the Gotham and the University Club and the beautiful church that should have been standing alone in the middle of a square as a landmark for all people who had found life out and wanted to kneel alone beneath the echoing arches and cry in their souls "Lord, I believe. Help thou mine unbelief." . . . The last of the sun glorified the tops of the higher buildings. A new moon hung white and shy against a sky as clear as crystal. The Fifth Avenue busses, loaded with workers going home, dominated the procession of traffic which oozed from block to block, on the way uptown. Among the few cars that went Martha's way there was that of the new breed of scavenger who hugged the curb and rolled his lascivious eyes and invited unaccompanied girls to "Come along in,"—coward and pesterer, fit only

for the lethal chamber. And there was one other but invisible creature who dogged Martha's steps, and that was the little devil of Bill's imagination who had accepted his challenge and was working to prove to him how dangerous it is to stand up in willful confidence and say, "Nothing can break my happiness." He was presently to head Martha to the Blue Room into which she ought not to look, and go on his diabolical way, laughing.

Turning at Forty-Fourth Street Martha seized the chance to cross the road and swung up again, darting an unseeing eye at pictures and silver and curios and carpets and motor cars, with which the East Side shops are full. She sang beneath her breath, and from time to time she shut her eyes as they were flooded with the waves of love. Her faith in the man for whom she had sent her prayers to heaven was a passionate intuition. In her childish hero-worship she thought of him as a Knight Crusader who had fought his way through all temptation to stand unspotted at her side. Always in search of her he had passed through avenues of women without having been held by even a single glance. And as she entered the building which looked out upon the Plaza it was with the unshakable belief that she would find him standing in a room hung with frames which had been empty until he had seen her face. This was to be the last time that they were ever to say good-by, and with his kisses on her lips she was to go away as in a dream, soon, very soon, to be kissed back to wakefulness.

There was a curious smile on the face of the man who took her up in the elevator. She was the fourth young woman who had gone up to the rooms of Major Mortimer. "You need n't ring," he said. "You can let yourself in."

She let herself into the hall, her heart as full of song as a young spring morning. She heard Bill's voice, speaking, she thought, to his valet. She tip-toed to the curtain that covered the arch, and peeped inside. . . .

Bill was standing with a glass in his hand, the well-known grin on his good-looking face. With her usual display of stockings Birdie Carroll had possessed herself of the sofa, her teeth that were almost too perfect to be true gleaming in the light of the lamps. Jeanne Dacoral, like a drawing by Hérouard in *La Vie Parisienne*, was riding a chair, man-wise, with her arms across the back, her black silk legs all glistening. Susie Hatch sat with bent head on the guard in front of the empty fire grate, holding a glass in both her hands. Several bottles stood on the writing table and the air was festooned with cigarette smoke.

Bill had almost arrived at the end of his speech.

". . . . A good boy now and the old days are over. When you go by this building you won't see my lights in these windows. Some other poor devil of a bachelor will be killing time as I did. But I shan't forget the jolly old times we've had here, my dears, or the tunes you used to play for me and the songs we sang. Bill is n't ungrateful. . . ."

Springing to her feet, with a burst of mimic tears, Birdie flung her wine into the air and her arms round Bill's unwilling neck, kissed him on the mouth and slobbered on his shoulder. And then, with a wail of despair in which there was more than a little of genuine feeling, — she had adored "Le Mortimeur" as she called him — Jeanne bore down upon Bill, took his face between her hands and between a series of resounding kisses cried out endearing words. Holding her distance and playing Canute with her tears Susie held her glass as high as she could, shaped her trembling lips to the words "Good luck, Bill," drank and dropped, her self-repression swept before a tornado of weeping.

And Martha, tottering beneath the broken roof-beams of the world, let fall the curtain of the Blue Room, fumbled her way to the staircase, went down and down until she reached the foyer and the street and passed into the Valley of the Shadow.

PART VI

I

TEDDY JEDBURGH had driven to town that day with Bill. He intended to buy a wedding present for Martha, — Primrose as he always thought of her, — dine with the British Assistant Provost Marshal at the Ritz and catch the ten-o'clock train home again. He had spent half an hour at Cartier's, had finally chosen a flexible diamond and platinum bracelet, a graceful little thing of beautiful workmanship, and with this in his pocket and envy of Bill in his heart had gone downtown to the offices of the British Mission in Whitehall Street through the swarming financial district of New York, whose narrowest parts, where they were devoid of sky-scrapers, bore a brotherly resemblance to Threadneedle and Throgmorton Streets in the city of London. Here he found that his friend the Colonel, who had been badly wounded in the neck during the first year of the war and had done very brilliant work in the Secret Service until he had been placed in charge of the British Military Mission in this country, was up to his eyes in business. He re-

luctantly would not be able to keep his engagement to dine.

And so by subway to Forty-Second Street, hanging to a strap in a jam-packed sardine tin which rattled and shook and swerved, he found himself back on Fifth Avenue, at the moment when Bill was making his farewell speech to three of the girls who had helped him to escape from boredom in those careless days of his before the war, when he had outdone the example of the amorous Commodore.

With the sense of extreme isolation which comes upon a man when he is among a great crowd he walked aimlessly up the Avenue, at a loose end. By the kindness and hospitality for which America is famous he had been made a temporary member of a dozen clubs, and intended presently to choose one of them in which to eat a solitary meal, with the Evening Sun propped up against the water bottle.

His thoughts were of his equally lonely father who, at that very minute, was probably taking a nap in the quiet reading room of Arthur's in St. James's Street, three thousand miles away, dreaming, maybe, of the "good old days" during which the Bad Men of British Liberal politics, by their willful determination not to recognize in Germany's immense preparations the menace which lay over Europe, drugged his country into a false security and refused to listen to the inspired warnings of the old warrior which would have taken the sword out of the mailed fist.

The family house sold to one of those vile and

vulgar dogs who had grown rich on the blood and bones of his countrymen, and now taxed to the teeth by the very men who had been too fearful of losing public support and popularity to levy taxes for National Service, he could see the old Peer wandering, a pathetic and paradoxical figure, the representative of a time completely out of date and a class almost wiped out of existence, from his rooms in Bury Street to his club in St. James's and back again, a poor and homeless man. He could imagine his father watching the frantic struggles of an effete Government to reconstruct a Constitution which they had themselves permitted to be smashed to pieces, listening to the ugly and perfectly natural growls of a people demoralized and denuded, and reading, with a faint sarcastic smile, the long and frequent honor lists which bestowed new titles upon people who would endeavor to build up a new aristocracy upon the ruins of one whose gallant heirs lay beneath the little crosses in France. At the age of sixty-three his father, like many other men of his kind, had had to give up his ancient and beautiful house to spend his remaining penurious days within the four walls of a club and bring them to an end in a small bedroom in a street of bachelor lodging houses. He and they, as well as the rest of his nation, had been sacrificed on the altar of Liberalism by a dozen selfish and unpatriotic Cabinet Ministers, backed by their sycophantic party political newspapers all of which had shrieked with terror when they saw that Lord Roberts was right and had ad-

vocated, with trembling knees, that Great Britain should ignore her treaty with France. Liberalism to the *n*th degree.

And as Jedburgh walked up the great Avenue that was so typical of the energy, daring and initiative of a great country still in its youth he asked himself what he was to do to make a living as soon as his present job came to an end and he had put aside his uniform for civilian clothes. He believed that the writing was even then on the wall for another and a more disastrous war within the next ten years. He believed that Germany would wait only until the Allies had scrapped their fighting machines and turned entirely to commerce before taking her revenge with a great army gathered and trained in secret. She would catch her enemies unprepared again and swipe them hip and thigh. The blood lust was ingrained in her body. He told himself that if he were called upon to fight again he would refuse, his patriotism killed. But he deceived himself, as did the vast majority of his countrymen who had come back to life, disgusted and with wounded souls. He would go back from whatever part of the world in which he was trying to earn his bread and once more offer himself to Death for the Cause, the pawn of the same politicians who had battered on the blood of his dead brothers. It was inevitable.

He now looked back at his talk with Bill the night of his arrival in New York with a sort of astonishment. What a fool he had been to lay the blame on

God for a war with which He had had nothing to do. As well lay the blame on the sun for a blight on the crops. What a pathetic result of shell-shock it was to imagine that he could do anything but hurt himself by pulling down his Church and hiding the stones in wild oats. The demoralization into which he had hoped to plunge was impossible to one of his inherent decency and fastidiousness, to say nothing of ideals. Even war did not alter a character such as his. Training and tradition stood for too much. They might be shaken and broken like the walls of a cathedral by shells, but the foundations remained. His month in Bill's rooms had proved to him that he was mentally and physically incapable of finding any sort of pleasure in the society of women represented by Birdie Carroll and Jeanne Dacoral. The more alluring they endeavored to make themselves the more they froze his blood. And as to the night life of New York, the crowded dancing floors of the hotels and restaurants seemed to him to epitomize lunacy, and the wailing of Jazz bands filled him with an overwhelming depression. His reaction to his old desires for wife and home and the decencies of life was instant and immediate. Then he had met Martha and his cure had become complete. The irony of the fact that she had been marked out for Bill gave him reason to believe that he was not on terms of friendship with luck. He would see his friend married, rejoin the Mission and wind up his work. Then what? It was a question that he was utterly unable to answer.

He had walked as far as Fifty-Seventh Street, his height and slightness emphasized by his uniform, a noticeable figure in any crowd by reason of his unconscious distinction and thoroughbred profile, to say nothing of the story of his gallantry which was told by the long line of ribbons on his chest, when, with a leap of the heart, he saw Martha facing him on the other side of the street, waiting for a line of cross-town traffic to come to a momentary end. He was astonished to see that she was alone, — this country primrose, and by the utter whiteness of her face and the agony in her eyes he sensed at once that something was wrong, that she had been hurt by one of the cursed and indiscriminate cruelties of life. He dodged between a motor lorry and a taxi cab, being missed by the latter by the eighth of an inch, and stood in front of her.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

There was no recognition in the first look that Martha gave him. Her eyes seemed to be turned inwards. Her lips were trembling. She looked like a flower washed colorless and almost uprooted by a thunder-storm.

“It’s Jedburgh,” he said, strangely anxious. “What are you doing here alone?” He had an exaggerated notion of the danger of the streets.

Like a sleep-walker who suddenly regains consciousness Martha gazed about her for a moment, focussed Jedburgh with awakened eyes and put out her hand with a touching and almost childlike eagerness for protection. “Oh, Teddy,” she said,

with a great shaking sob, "take me away, take me home."

Forcing back a thousand questions, Jedburgh hailed a taxi which followed at the tail end of the line of traffic, his one idea being to get Martha off the street and out of the range of inquisitive eyes. And as it drew up at the curb he opened the door and handed her in.

"Up the Avenue," he said sharply. "I'll tell you when to turn."

As the cab moved off and almost before he had settled in his seat Martha put her face against his shoulder and broke into a fit of dreadful weeping.

II

Wondering what dire thing could have happened to the sunny girl, the first sight of whom had revived his dream of home, Jedburgh put his arm tenderly about her shoulder and let her cry the pain out of her heart. He could only think, in his endeavor to find a reason for this startling breakdown when everything looked so well, that she had suddenly been told of the death of a precious friend. Children, it seemed to him, only wept like this when death had stalked into their lives, and to him Martha in her freshness and simplicity was still little more than a child. It never occurred to him, even remotely, that Bill was the cause of these broken flood-gates.

And when, presently, the cab having carried them past the Metropolitan Art Museum, Martha pulled

herself together and sat upright with her hands over her face, he got nothing from her except "I'm sorry, Teddy, I'm sorry." Her loyalty to Bill was too strong to permit her to draw a picture of what she had seen in the Blue Room, and it remained, like a canker, in her soul.

Jedburgh would have given all his hopes of Heaven to have taken Martha in his arms and let the cab drive them far out to some quiet place where he could keep her all to himself till the end of time, to love and cherish and protect. But Bill was his friend and was enthroned in the heart of this girl; there was no room in it for anyone else. Brother was the only part that he could play, and being Jedburgh, the man who stuck to the rules, he would play that part well.

"What am I to do with you, Primrose?"

Martha saw, with astonishment, that they were passing into that part of the Avenue which dwindled into a slum of tenement houses and small shops. She was alive after this death wound, she found, and must catch on again to its obligations. "We must go back," she said. "I am to call for Elizabeth Bartlett at nine o'clock. She is going to drive me home."

Jedburgh looked at his watch. It was only a little after seven. He put his head out of the cab window. "Go back to the Plaza," he said.

The Plaza! It was within a mere stone's throw of the rooms that she wished she had never entered. "No, not there."

"But you must have dinner. Where else would you like to go?"

"Anywhere else."

Once more Jedburgh spoke to the solid indifferent lump on the box, who cared nothing for the mental perturbation of his fares so long as his meter continued to click. Why should he?

"The St. Regis."

And so it was in the beetle-browed building of old-fashioned architecture which had retained its atmosphere of red plush dignity despite the time's subjection to the twin-devils of crudeness and jazz that Martha pretended to have dinner with Bill's pal, the other man who loved her. She ate little, though, with the courage and grit that was in the Wainwright blood, she smiled and kept the conversation from flagging. All the time the picture of Bill being kissed by those two exuberant and overdressed girls never left her. It sent constant waves of agony all over her body and turned her hot with jealous anger, and cold with an overpowering sense of disillusion, by turns. But it was the sight of Susie's tragic face and the sound of her deep anguish that hit her hardest. Bill's life had not been hers, as she had believed in her young and simple way. He was coming to her not as an original, unread, and untouched, but as a much thumbed book. It staggered her. It shook her faith in everything that was good.

As for Jedburgh, who congratulated himself on having been able to cheer Martha out of what in

the light of her recovery he conceived to be a very natural *crise de nerfs* — she was not in the habit of being left alone in that swarming city and had probably been frightened — he rather pathetically enjoyed this unexpected opportunity of having his Primrose to himself for a while. He had never had the luck before. And he made the best and the most of it in his characteristically British manner. He treated her as though she were a little princess placed temporarily in his care. He strained every Anglo-Saxon effort to be merry and bright in his quiet, ungestured way, and must have appeared to anyone interested enough to watch him to be a town uncle attempting to amuse a country niece, or a big brother entertaining a young sister whom he had not seen since she had left the nursery. He felt rather like both these people during the even course of this slowly served meal in that religiously lit room with its dark wood and red velvet, its innumerable tables of people who liked to get away from the heterogeneous crowd and eat without syncopation. And once or twice, as he watched Martha and realized how young and ingenuous and spring-like she was, sitting opposite to him, he felt queerly old and inappropriate and out of her generation; curiously unelastic and set. Even if she had never loved Bill, so different from himself, who had succeeded in coming out of the war with all his old gaiety and love of life, could he ever have stirred this charming thing to interest or touched her heart with the warmth of his first love?

He thought not, and felt humble and out of everything.

Altogether it was a brief sad interlude, a little oasis of companionship which had in it nothing of mutual understanding, that both would remember in after years. Ever, probably, it would be associated with dark wood and red velvet.

At a quarter to nine, the last of the diners, he looked at the watch by which he had timed so many of his adventures with Death. "We had better go now," he said. "Where did you say your friend lived?"

With the most intense feeling of relief Martha rose. "East Sixty-Third Street," she answered.

"Will you walk or drive?"

"Oh, walk, please. It's no distance."

It was one of those warm still nights which steal quietly on the heels of a hot hard-working day. The sky seemed abnormally high and clear, pitted with the lights of the cities of the spirits. The tall houses appeared to be short beneath it, and even the Plaza, with its tiers of golden windows, looked like the house of Lilliputians. It was with averted eyes that Martha passed Bill's apartment. Jedburgh had no inclination to look up at the familiar windows either, that time, or make any reference to the man who had all the luck. Instead, he ran his hand through Martha's arm.

"I want you to promise me something," he said. "Will you?"

"Anything," she said. This man was very kind. He rang as true as a bell.

"If, before you are married, you feel you have to cry again, choose my shoulder once more. It's the least I can do for you, and I'd like to do so much."

Martha did n't laugh. She looked up at the man in whose eyes there was a curious yearning and tightened her arm on his hand. "I will," she said, wondering if she had any more tears to cry.

"I shall probably not see you again to talk to," he went on, quietly. "I shall come back to town as soon as you are off on your honeymoon and after that I don't know what. So this is good-by. I wish you a thousand joys."

"Thank you," she said, choking. Joys — after what she had seen!

They turned into East Sixty-Fourth Street in silence, both on the wings of different thoughts. An opulent car was waiting outside number eleven. The well-fed chauffeur was humming the air of a Winter Garden tune, easily recognizable from its peculiar banality.

"Thank you again," said Martha.

Jedburgh rang the bell that he found on the right side of a glass door covered by a screen of wrought iron. It might have been in the Avenue Hausmann.

"Won't you come in and meet Elizabeth?"

"No, thanks. I have to see a man at the Lotus Club." He had n't. He did n't know a single member of it. Two was company and Mrs. Bart-

lett, he imagined, was also a believer in that axiom. And so he took the little outstretched hand and held it for a moment. "Good-by, then. God bless you, Primrose," he said, gave her the sort of salute that he had reserved for Field Marshals, wheeled about and walked away.

Life, like a jig-saw puzzle, is only perfect if all the pieces fit. He could never make his picture complete — now.

Could she?

III

MARTHA was afraid to turn out the lights. She felt that the bedroom in which she had dreamed nightly for two years, and from which she was to go forth so soon as the bride of the man who had fallen from his pedestal, would be peopled by those three girls, come to jeer at her for her hero-worship and scream with raucous mirth at her unsophistication. She sat for hours with her face in her hands, a little figure of misery, with Bill's words ringing in her ears, — "a good boy now and the old days are over. But I shan't forget the jolly old times we've had here, my dears, or the tunes you used to play for me and the songs we sang. Bill is n't ungrateful. . . ."

Over and over again, remorselessly, she saw Birdie spring to her feet, with a burst of tears, fling her wine into the air and press kiss after kiss on Bill's mouth. Over and over again, with ever increasing agony, she saw Jeanne Dacoral get up from

the chair that she was straddling with her careless display of legs, bear down upon Bill with a wail of grief and possess herself of his lips. And over and over again the picture of the girl with the golden hair and the tragic face who raised her glass and dropped like a bird with a bullet through its breast flashed in frightful clearness before her eyes. The rest was a blur, — her stumble, filled with dreadful thoughts, into the street, her faith all smashed; her meeting with Jedburgh; the dinner at the St. Regis; the long drive home with Elizabeth Bartlett, whose merry tongue never ceased to wag; her smiling good-nights to her family, to whom of all people she would not confess. All those things were vague and shapeless like the unfounded suspicions that pass through a brain under an anæsthetic. The horrors disclosed by her peep into the Blue Room were stamped indelibly on her mind, to recur again and again through the quiet hours of that tortured night and to uproot her passionate and long-cherished trust in Bill, which had been as perfect as her faith in God.

It is true that if she had been less proud and less loyal and had taken her trouble to Elizabeth Bartlett, who answered in every detail to the white-haired lady's definition of the modern girl, she would have been told that she was making too big a mountain out of this very ordinary molehill. The girl who was married to young Bartlett was one of those ultra-modern persons, who stepped into the world from a fashionable school with nothing to learn and

so little self-respect that she could regard marriage as lightly as a game of cards, as the first stepping stone to a series of experiences which would leave her unaffected and unperturbed. "Anything once," was Elizabeth's unhygienic motto, and in that spirit and with the example of so many easily broken marriages before her, she had run off to a registry office with Bartlett after a week-end acquaintance, rather proud of the fact that he had been very "hot stuff." He had plenty of money, danced like a streak and gave her a free hand. That was all she cared about. If anyone else came along who had more money, danced better and gave an even smaller damn for anything under the sun, Bartlett could be chucked, because divorce was as easy as falling off a log. If she had been in England during the war she would certainly have been numbered among those highly civilized children who, widowed twice in three years, were married for a third time while still in the early twenties. She had all the assets that went to the making of such a feat, — a pretty face, a slim figure, a command of slang that put the great masters into the shade, the staying power of a camel, and the quiet disregard for underclothing that had been achieved only by the most finished Greeks in history.

"My dear," she would have said, utterly satisfied with the decadent effect of her black chiffon pajamas, "Bill Mortimer is thirty-five. Does he look like the sort of small-town boob who has neglected all his chances in order to cultivate sweet peas

and quote Elbert Hubbard to the elderly spinster who runs the village Library? He's one of the best-looking things in trousers and has had the run of the world. He'd be a freak if he had n't played the good old game for everything it's worth. And now you have the luck to catch him on the rebound at the moment of his life when he'll make the ideal husband and go to heel humbly whenever you crack the whip, so what's the grumble? Drag him to the altar, gold dig systematically while the going's good, and when he's doddering into nervous dyspepsia shake him and begin all over again with a man of your own age. That's the great idea, dearie."

But being herself something of a freak in these most civilized days and the daughter of Wainwrights, Martha said nothing and retired into the secrecy of her room to tremble under the effects of this earthquake, this upheaval of her illusions, to suffer from that form of soul-shock which only attacks those of our girls who have not grown with the times.

The unheeded hours slipped away while the moon and stars kept vigil and still Martha sat with her face in her hands, a little figure of misery. But when the day broke and the earth stirred and life rose from its bed to resume its duties, she got up, tired and aching, dressed and crept downstairs. The Seven Sisters seemed to call her with the promise of sympathy, and she went through the dew-spangled garden and along the path through the lush

of grass to the hill from which she had so often sent up her prayers to Heaven for the safe return of Bill. Here, in this roofless cathedral, with the matins of the birds in her ears, she went down on her knees once more and asked for help and guidance, because she found herself stumbling blindly in a maze of doubts, the only way out of which seemed to her to lead away from Bill, even although her wedding dress was ready, the ring waiting for her and the two families within two days of standing before the altar.

But no help came. Instead, as she strained into the future, she could see the figures of those girls, — and there might be others, — intruding into her life, springing up, not in flesh and blood perhaps, but certainly in imagination, to stand, in crucial moments, between herself and Bill. Also she could hear her inward questions as to whether Bill's endearing words had not all been said before, — shallow repetitions of former love affairs, and feel the awful suspicion that in his moments of silence or his dreams at night he might be living over again the old days for which he was not ungrateful, in the Blue Room that he imagined was locked against her.

She rose from her knees and turned to the Seven Sisters, whose old arms seemed to be straining to touch her. "I can't go through with it, I can't go through with it," she cried out. "I can't. I can't. It's broken my heart and killed my faith. I wish I had died believing."

IV

ALL that day and the next saw bustle and excitement in the two houses, — the old and the new. It had been decided that the ceremony should not take place in the village church but in the drawing room of the Wainwright house. It was to be a quiet affair witnessed only by the members of the two families and performed by the minister before whom Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright had stood all those years ago. From the white-haired lady's gardens masses of ravishing flowers were sent over, all of them charged to waft on their scent to the little bride the affectionate good wishes of those that remained unplucked.

Wainwright gave himself two days' holiday ostensibly to lend a hand with the preparations, in reality to see the last of Martha as his own particular property before he handed her over to her husband. In a state of inarticulate emotion he devoted the first of these days to driving her about the country, giving her lunch at one inn and tea at another, saying not one single thing with which his heart was full but doling out to the girl with the queer look in her eyes an intimate dissertation on the intricacies of banking which gave her no clew as to how to make her escape from the now meaningless ring. If it was a painful duty to them, it was at any rate all the more useful to Mrs. Wainwright because of their absence from the house in which, as it was, Tom and Elizabeth Bartlett got badly in

her way. She had her own views as to how things should be done, and since, without her, this marriage would have been impossible, she intended by hook or by crook to do them according to those views, Tom and Elizabeth notwithstanding. Discovering this early in the proceedings the giddy Bartlett led Tom to the tennis court and reduced him to a pulp. The smile on Mrs. Wainwright's face as she saw their strenuous white figures out in the sun must have stirred the sympathy of all departed housewives.

In the Mortimer house, Denham, directed by the Commodore, took charge of Bill's packing, while the white-haired lady and Bill endeavored unsuccessfully to put in a spoke. Anyone would have thought from the Old Rip's excitement that he was to be the happy man and that Bill was his ancient and senile parent. The comedy of it all was brought up to a quick and pulsating moment of drama when the old devil, as Denham called him, suddenly wheeled round upon his wife and son and cried out, "For the love of Heaven give me my head. Do you suppose that I shall leave anything out after having packed my things for at least a dozen honeymoons? My God, you two, use your imaginations and permit me to finish my job in peace."

Whereupon Bill escorted his mother to the hill of the Seven Sisters with a lunch basket, a box of cigarettes and a tin of tobacco, and lay for hours with his head against her shoulder painting pictures of a golden future, the past forgotten, while Lylyth,

the mother, old now and nearly ready to say good-bye to a life which had had many compensations, let her thoughts stray back to the far off time when she too had been brought forward to enter the marriage state.

The superfluous Jedburgh wandered out alone, looking no further forward than the moments when he would fulfill his duties as Bill's best man and watch his friend drive away, later, with the Primrose. He took with him, on his aimless walk, a new and growing belief that he had been strangely lacking in perception to have dismissed Martha's tornado of tears as the mere reaction from girlish fright in being left by herself in the crowded City. He was anxious, for Bill's sake.

It was in the lane that led to the stone erections on each side of the driveway to his house that Wainwright took a leap out of his shyness and let Martha see into his warm and simple heart. He stopped the car suddenly at a place where the bald house was hidden by a group of Christmas trees, and put his arms round the precious child who had played straight and shared his den and become the living embodiment of his domestic dreams, the reward for his ceaseless efforts to make good. "You won't forget your old father," he said, in a voice that shook with emotion. "You won't forget me, darling."

And Martha, who knew that she must go as soon as she had found a way, hid her face against his chest. It would have been better if she had never seen Bill and loved him so much.

"I shall miss you, — oh God, I shall miss you, my pet. It had to come, I know that. Parents only bring up their children for other people to take away. That's the law of life and I'm not grumbling. But it's happened before I was quite ready to give you up, and I shall be a sort of — of cripple when you've gone."

He held her with a kind of passion, while the tears that he had kept back since the night that she had gone into Bill's arms streamed down his face.

And Martha, afraid to let him see the trouble in her eyes, put her hand on his lips. If only he would spare her by forgetting to wish her the happiness that she could never enjoy. She could n't bear to hear that. She could n't. She could n't.

But he did, as he was bound to do. "I like Bill," he went on. "As your mother says, he's just a great boy, eager to make a home for himself and settle down. Not because he told me so, but from everything about him I know that he loves you as you deserve, my sweetheart, and you'll have a splendid life and bring that old family back into fineness again. I wish you every joy and I ask God to bless you. But you'll remember the old man, sometimes, and come and sit on the other side of the desk again, won't you, — for auld lang syne?"

Martha had wept her tears away, but she crept a little closer to that good and guileless man who had made it possible for her to erect a pedestal for Bill, made of the solid rock of faith, and trembled.

And they sat in silence, in the exquisite sympathy of father and daughter, and clung to each other for a little while, before parting.

When, presently, the car was driven under the porte-cochère and Martha ran up the steps, Wainwright pottered about the garage for half an hour so that he might present his ordinary face to his wife and son. Thank God, his boy would stick to the nest for a bit and was to join him in his business.

Bill, in his dressing gown, long after everyone had gone to bed, was marching up and down his room in the old house that night, thinking of Martha and trying to find uncolloquial words with which to offer up thanks for his reconstruction. He was moved to a mixture of joy and solemnity. His Miss Respectable was the most adorable thing that the angels had ever watched over. He loved her like a father and a mother and a lover all in one. She held him in the palm of her hand. He was, being the Bill Mortimer who had come back from the shambles and the Bill Mortimer who had rotted in his youth, painfully and even tragically dependent upon her. She stood for all that he hoped and intended to become. She was purity that demanded all the best and the most tender of him. She was youth that was to make him young again. She was rectitude that was to call out of him the example and tradition of his forbears, hitherto ignored. She was courage that would set him in step with her along the path to fatherhood. She was pride that

would demand for her truth and cleanness and respect.

These were great and uplifting hours in the life of this man Bill, who had come out of all his self-indulgence with a surprising naïveté, a tremendous desire to remake himself and a sensitiveness that was as keen as a woman's. And he enjoyed them and the ecstasy that they gave him, for all the sense of unfitness which crept up behind them, and perhaps a little more because of that. No man, if he deals honestly with himself, wishes to say, on the verge of marriage, that he is up to the standard of the girl that he has won. A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for. To be unworthy — not too much but a little — makes his success so much more worth while, so much greater an achievement. It is an inspiration, an urge. It elevates marriage far above the ordinary run of great adventures. It places it among crusades. It puts the glamour about it of high romance, of personal amazement, and makes a man say to himself, with a rare humility, "Please God, I shall be deserving." And what more hopeful beginning could there be in the working out of the everlasting problem so seldom solved than that?

It was two o'clock when Bill's door opened very quietly and the white-haired lady stole in. Unable to sleep for the flights of thoughts that circled about her bed like swallows, she had risen to put her lips to the forehead of the man who once had been her

very own, the lad all dependent, to whom she had been Queen.

"Bill!" she said, and drew up short, disappointed.

"Anything wrong?" Bill was immediately at her side.

"No, indeed," she said. "Everything is very right, my dear. I tiptoed in expecting to find you fast asleep, and to put the clock back to the time when I was the only woman in your life. What you call an orgy of sentimentality, Bill. That's all. Very forgivable under the circumstances." She spoke lightly and gave one of those soft laughs of hers. She had become an adept at hiding her feelings. Her hair was hidden beneath a lace cap and she wore a clinging peignoir of an egg-shell blue. Imagination, reversing the perspective of her senses, had made the past the present, Bill a few years old and herself a girl once more. Beauty had come back to her face and figure for a moment.

An orgy of sentimentality? He had preened himself on having used a clever phrase. But there was no affectation of fine feeling about all this, — his desire to reconstruct, his love for Martha, the ambition of his old people to hear the pattering feet of young Mortimers, the emotion of the Wainwrights, the birth of Martha's star. It went to the making of the first exquisite reality of his life, he knew. And he knew, also, as he looked into his mother's eyes, — the magic of the moon on the sleeping earth, — that she had come to his room to stand for a little while in a waking dream that gave

him back to her, the boy who had never deeply realized her mother passion or put into words his gratitude for her love.

He put her into a chair, and letting down his fourth wall, knelt at her feet, with his arms round her waist. "Mum," he said, "I wanted you to come to-night. I wanted to tell you that it's all the you in me that's come to the top at last and is going to help me to be a good boy now. I wanted you to know that I have n't played the fool all these years quite as unkindly as I might, because of the things you said over me when I slept here as a kid. That is n't much to say, but it's something, and it goes to show that the careless devil in me was n't able to let me forget altogether the effect of your love. I'm awful sick at having gone back on you, Mum darling. If I had my time over again I'd try mighty hard to live up to your standard. But what's done is over and can't be altered. The future's mine though, and I want you to be very sure that whether you're here or not I'll take you with me through it all to keep me straight and faithful and make me come out at the end as the son you would have had me be from the beginning. So help me God."

The little cry that broke from that woman's heart must have made the angels weep.

And all that day and the next the sun shone and the birds sang and peace hung over the land, and not one of the people in this human comedy ever sus-

pected that the *dea ex machina*, the little leading lady, the young bride to be, was trying, like a prisoner condemned to death, to find a way to live, to break from a bond which, although to be blessed by the church, had become unholy in her eyes.

V

BARCLAY MORTIMER, made up for a wedding and entirely outside himself, according to Denham, put the bridegroom through a close inspection.

"Um," he said, walking slowly and disconcertingly round the nervous and jumpy Bill. "I suppose you 'll have to go like that."

"What's the matter with me? Oh, curse this collar."

"My dear fellow, why didn't you take me to that damned tailor of yours? He's waisted you too high. He's cut your tails in the appalling modern way that allows them to bulge open at every movement you make. He's given you two buttons too many at the top of your waistcoat" — he called it *westkut* as you may suppose — "and he's skimped on your trousers in the German American manner that puts some of the men of my country among the comics."

"I took what he gave me," said Bill, with a valiant effort to retain his temper.

"I see that, my boy," replied Barclay Mortimer, dryly. "But don't you know that the only way to get civilized garments from a tailor is not to let him make what *he* wants but what you intend to

have, if necessary, at the point of a revolver? There's not one thing right about you, Bill, I regret to say. You don't look remotely like a gentleman, my dear fellow. Thank Heaven it's to be a family affair from which the evil eye of the camera will be absent. Scrap those dreadful things as soon as you can get out of them, but don't give them to Denham. He knows clothes."

Denham bowed to hide his chagrin. Having the run of the Commodore's wardrobe and everything that he discarded he certainly would not have been seen dead in Bill's things. He could have sold the damned things to the village undertaker, though.

Bill was no pacifist. He had been struggling for two days to say nothing to hurt the old man's feelings, but this was the limit of his endurance. "I know I look like a cursed cow-puncher in Sunday reach-me-downs," he said, "and I'm as nervous as a cat now. Why go out of your way to make me worse? You want me to get married, don't you? It won't amuse you if I can the whole show, will it? Because that's what I shall do if you pick on me any more." He turned savagely on a hat box and let out a kick that sent it into the middle of next week.

There was a cry from Denham and a groan from the Commodore. A new and glossy hat was in that box. A nice-looking thing it would be after this brutal treatment.

And then Bill burst into a great laugh and put his arm round his father's shoulders. "Good Lord,"

he said. "Anyone would think to see all this temperament that we were long-haired musicians or something. After all, Dad, I'm going to be married, not buried. Let's be cheerful. Let's see it through with a grin."

For the first time for forty-eight hours the old man's sense of humor came through. "The size and shape of my grandchild don't depend on the cut of a coat," he said, with a touch of coarseness, and joined in the laugh. Whereupon the heat of the atmosphere became normal once more and business proceeded without further hitches.

It was true that there were a number of bad points in Bill's appearance, but they could n't take away from the excellence of his tall wiry figure, his well-cut, sun-tanned face or the expression of boyish excitement in his large dark eyes. On the other hand, the absolute perfection of the Old Rip, who might have stepped out of the pages of a book of English fashion plates, served rather to call attention to the sadness of his dyed hair, the pouter pigeon effect caused by his corsets and the general appearance of pathetic time-wrestle that was all about him. Life is very just in its compensations.

In the meantime the white-haired lady, all ready for the ceremony, had driven unnoticed into the village, spent ten minutes on her knees in the quiet church and returned to walk among her roses, with a little smile on her face. Her scheme to bring Martha forward, the last and most urgent of all her schemes, had worked with amazing smoothness,

she thought. By the grace of God she would not now pass out of life without having the joy and delight of welcoming a grandchild to the old house. And she congratulated herself on what she looked upon as her master-stroke as she passed slowly from rose to rose in that charming garden of hers.

Little she knew, poor lady, of the cruel and shattering plan that Martha was just then making to punish Bill for his Blue Room.

Jedburgh was reading out in the sun when Bill burst upon him like a tornado. "Have you ever been to a wedding in a drawing-room before, Teddy?"

"No, never."

"Great guns!"

"Why, what's the trouble?"

Bill answered the question by asking another. Everything may be excused in a man on the verge of being married. "Will you do something for me? Will you go over to the Wainwrights' and interview the padre? The old boy stayed there last night and will be hanging about doing nothing. Ask him the routine for me, Teddy. Get him to tell you when I march in and how, and where I stand when I get there and all that. I'm awful sorry to work you, old man, but I don't want to make any bloomers and look a bigger boob than I feel in these frightful clothes, and Mrs. Wainwright will throw a fit if I stand on the wrong side of something. If you get all the dope you can prime me up when I drive

round with mother and the old man. I've tried to get it from him, but he's almost as fluffy-minded as I am to-day, and mother says she could n't venture to suggest the Boston way of doing this thing. Hang about on the steps and pounce when you see me. It's frightfully important, old son, or I would n't ask you to do it."

"It is frightfully important, Bill, and must be done," said Jedburgh, gravely. He had never seen his friend in such a condition of mental and physical frazzle. He had obviously to be humored.

"Can I take a car?"

"Take the lot. You've got the ring all right?"

"Rather."

"Sure, Teddy? Absolutely sure?"

Jedburgh brought it out to prove the fact.

And Bill heaved a sigh of relief. He was a very worried Bill. "I don't know what I should do without you, Teddy. You're like one of the lions in Trafalgar Square. God bless you, old man."

"God bless *you*, old man, and the little bride." And they shook hands as though they were about to part for many years.

But the car had only gone halfway down the drive when there was a tremendous shout. The chauffeur clapped on the brakes. Bill came alongside under the old trees, breathless.

"Did I ask you if you had the ring, Teddy?"

"No," said Jedburgh, more gravely than before. "But I have." And once again he held it out to prove the fact.

And this time the old grin spread itself over Bill's face, and he gave a gesture with which to express his honest belief that he was as near protoplasm as a bridegroom can get and his profound apologies for the very natural mishap. And then he walked back saying aloud hoarsely the responses that would be presently demanded of him. Married, — and to that bewitching girl with her flower face and the honesty of a lighthouse. It was inconceivable. If the men of his old regiment had been able to see him then they would have blinked in amazement. They would n't have recognized the old cool, light-hearted Bill.

In the blue sky there was a cloud a good deal larger than a man's hand.

Jedburgh interviewed a garrulous maid in the hall of the Wainwright house. The drawing-room door was closed. But everywhere there were flowers. He was told that Miss Martha had been dressed some time, that Mrs. Wainwright and Mrs. Bartlett were now dressing and that the gentlemen were downstairs in the billiard-room having a cocktail. Would he go down? He would. And he was left because someone called from the dining room, in which he could see a beautifully decorated table. Not knowing the geography of this house, in which he had never been before, he went to the end of the hall and opened a door that he imagined would lead downstairs. It gave out, on the contrary, to the deserted piazza at the back, across which he

saw a girl creeping on tiptoe with a face as white as a white rose, dressed in everyday clothes and carrying a small bag. . . . Good God, it was Martha!

And then, as though a shutter had opened in his brain, he knew that Bill had been the cause of those dreadful tears and that look of agony over which he had puzzled by day and night. In an instant he was out and with arms outstretched in front of the escaping girl, blocking the way.

"Let me pass," cried Martha.

"Not in this world," said Jedburgh.

"Let me pass, I tell you."

"I tell you, no."

There was a dive, a scuffle, a little heartrending cry . . . and Jedburgh, gripping Martha tight by the wrist, drew her into a glassed-in sun-porch and shut the door.

"Now tell me," he said. "Quick."

"I can't go through with it, I can't. I've waited till now, hoping that I could stay to spare mother and father, but I can't. Oh, let me go."

"You don't know what this would mean to the two families, and I'm the only living man who can tell you what this would mean to Bill. It can't be done. It's too late."

The bag fell with a clatter and Martha's hands went up to her face.

And Jedburgh put his arm round her shoulder and drew the trembling thing against his heart. "What is it, Primrose? Tell me."

There was a rush and tumble of words, like a fall of pent-up water. . . . "I love him and believed in him and thought he had never loved or kissed anyone but me. He never told me when he came back, and all the time he's been away I'd been building a mountain of faith on which he stood. I went to his rooms that day in town, to see him in them before he came to me, to see the emptiness of his life until I filled it with my love and — Oh, I can't go on, I can't go on."

"Go on," said Jedburgh, although he believed that he could guess. "Into the Blue Room thou shalt not look!"

And without tears, for they had all been wept, but with a voice shaking with jealousy and anger and grief and broken faith she painted the pictures that had never ceased to pass across her brain and which had driven her to this, after two days' agony of struggle, and from a marriage into which they would follow her and divide her like walls of doubt and suspicion from happiness and security. And her last words were difficult to refute, difficult to argue against. "It's unfair," she cried out. "It's unfair. . . . Let me go. I can't go through with it. I shall never forget."

And there was half a moment of silence in which Jedburgh also saw the picture that he had painted in his dreams by night and day, — home, with a primrose in its garden. It came and went, like a mirage, like a dream. But he took her hands from her face and looked deeply into her eyes.

"Do you love Bill in spite of what you have discovered? Tell me that."

"Yes," said Martha.

"And will you never marry any other man if I let you go?"

"No," said Martha, "never."

"Then go up to your room, my dear, and get back into your wedding dress. Of all the people alive you are the last one to usurp the punishment of God for what Bill has done before he found you. Only from the moment that he came to you have you the right to his life. That's yours, and because he loves you it will be worth having, worth shaping, worth building up into a good and blessed thing. Let the dead past bury its dead. It's a gruesome trick to fumble about among the gravestones. He is your man. You love him. Without him you will go barren through life. It's not yours to forgive or to forget. It's not yours at all. It's his, — to regret and to pay for in remorse. You have no share in his bills until to-day. You may see them all from now on, because he loves you, and for your sake they will be honest and mutual. Do you understand?"

The color had come back to her face. She stood upright once more as though a crushing weight had fallen from her shoulders. And in her eyes there was fire again and something that only comes to youth in moments of sudden understanding. And she took his hand and pressed her lips to it.

He had prevented a catastrophe and translated pride into humbleness. "Come quick," he said.

He opened the door, gave her the bag, and led her into the house, made sure that nobody was about, and let her go. She flew upstairs to her room on the wings of love.

Did he believe in all the arguments that he had used to bring her back to sanity? Yes, because Bill was his friend and his feet were deep in traditions. No, because Martha was in his heart and the word 'unfair' was right.

But once again the picture of his dream flashed across his mind as he stood at Bill's side, before the altar of flowers, with the ring between his fingers, miles away in loneliness. And very faintly the grave and lovely words of the marriage service came to his ears, binding Bill and Martha with a bond that only death could break. The ring delivered up, he saw the look on Bill's tanned face that made him rejoice for the future happiness of the little girl whose love was like a star, and when he saw the tears spring to her eyes he was glad for the accident which had made him open the door to the piazza,—which was not an accident, for God is very good to His children.

And as those two, for better or for worse, standing among the parents to whom they meant so much, came finally together, he turned away quietly and went out into the sun.

*"In the world of dreams I have chosen my part,
To sleep for a season and hear no word
Of true love's truth or of light love's art,
Only the song of a secret bird."*

THE END





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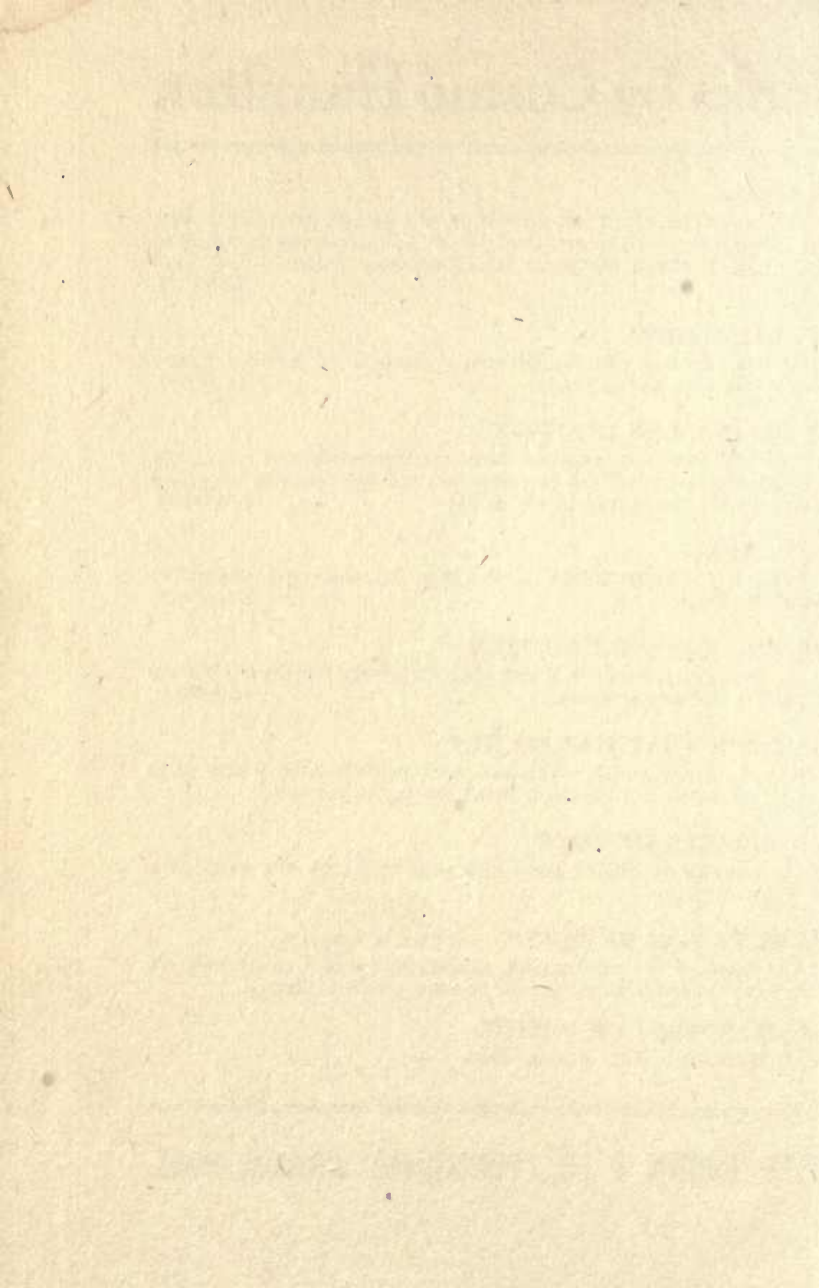
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